

WHY RELATIONSHIP MATTERS: COVENANT, DISCIPLESHIP,
AND CONGREGATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY
IN UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

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A FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED TO
THE DOCTORAL STUDIES COMMITTEE
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

UNITED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
Dayton, Ohio
May 2024

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ABSTRACT

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by
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This project was conducted at University Unitarian Universalist Fellowship (UUUF), in Orlando, Florida. The problem is that Unitarian Universalist (UU) congregations do not spend adequate time teaching members what it means to be a practicing Unitarian Universalist. If members had this grounding, then they would be more confident living their values and telling people about Unitarian Universalism. This project was conducted over six weeks. Data was collected through pre- and post-project questionnaires, journals, class discussions, and post-project interviews. As a result of this class, participants reported greater knowledge of their faith and more confidence in sharing it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The journey toward a Doctor of Ministry often appears to be a solo one, but this is not the case. This journey is impossible without support around the student. I am forever grateful for the support of my husband, my in-laws, my “Adult-Onset Sisterhood” from seminary, my cohort members, and the many Unitarian Universalists who have engaged with me in various coffee hours and sermons speak about the research involved in this project.

First, to my husband, Richard Jones, this was only possible with your unconditional love and support over the last three years of this program. Your encouragement to follow my dreams, even if it meant a lot of travel and study time, is what kept me going. I could not have done this without you. I thank God every day that you came into my life. I am excited about where our journey will lead us in the future. I love you with every fiber of my being.

In that same vein, the unconditional love of my mother-in-law has been the greatest gift I’ve ever received. You have cheered me on as I go, and that has been amazing. Thank you, Martha Jones, for showing me what a mother’s love truly is. Te amo mamá y doy gracias a Dios por tu presencia en mi vida. And to my bonus sister, Howie-Alice Jones, your enthusiasm over this journey has given me strength and buoyed my spirits when I needed it. Thank you.

In 2018, four of us from seminary were dubbed the “Adult-Onset Sisterhood.” That name has stuck, and this group of fiery and faithful women has continually called me back to myself and encouraged me to be better throughout this process and throughout my ministry. Thank you, Kali Fyre, Michelle Lattanzio, and Andrea Hawkins-Kamper, for helping me formulate my thoughts, being rant partners as I began making connections, and reading over bits and pieces as I shared them. You have truly shown me what it means to have sisters, and I couldn’t imagine my life or my ministry without you.

To my cohort members from Open the Floodgates, you have each enriched my life through our friendship. As a Unitarian Universalist, there was some trepidation about entering into a non-UU school. You each welcomed me with such grace and curiosity that you created a sense of home away from home. Through our conversations and prayer times, I have grown deeper in my own faith. I have greatly appreciated knowing you were all a text or call away when I needed prayer or wanted to share a joyful testimony.

To my peer associate, Jason Stanley, you have been a rock during this journey. I have appreciated our Sunday evening dinners at intensives, the silent conversations we’ve shared, and all the encouraging words. You’ve helped me far more than you could ever know. I hope this friendship lasts for many years beyond our graduation.

To my professional associates, Rev. Dr. Nicole Kirk and Rev. Dr. Michelle Lattanzio, your guidance and wisdom have been instrumental in my development as a minister and an academic. Years ago, Nicole, you told me I’d write a book one day. That stayed with me and fueled me through this. That and the love of history you instilled in me. Michelle, your way with words has helped me be even more polished and expressive. Thank you both!

To the many contextual associates at University Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, I thank you all. Your support as I followed this path has been amazing. I have been blessed to be your minister. For the participants of my project, I am forever in your debt. Your willingness to attend each week, to be vulnerable with me and each other, and your constructive feedback have blown me away. Many congregants offered editing support, well wishes, advice, and check-ins, and every single one is appreciated. I also wish to thank the congregants of Mosaic Unitarian Universalist for our great conversations during coffee hour as I researched for this project.

To my mentors, Rev. Dr. Brian Law and Rev. Sue Nilson Kibbey, and my faculty consultant, Dr. Calvin Lane, you all have been amazing supports for me. You have encouraged, challenged, and helped me be a better student and minister. It has been an honor to be part of the inaugural semester of our cohort.

Finally, to the holy mystery of the universe, known by many names and no name, you placed a word in my mouth, and I have spoken it. May this work go forth and fulfill its destiny. May it be said that I have been a good and faithful servant.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the memory of my father, William Jay Barrett (1936-2016), who taught me to tinker, to always question why, to fix things that are broken, and that I can achieve anything I strive for. I love you and miss you, Daddy. You've been the one to guide me but never held me down.

ABBREVIATIONS

BCE	Before the Common Era
CE	Common Era
COIC	Commission on Institutional Change
Cor	Corinthians
UU	Unitarian Universalist
UUA	Unitarian Universalist Association
UUUF	University Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

—Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*

In a dark place we find ourselves, and a little more knowledge lights our way.

—Yoda

INTRODUCTION

My father put the first tools in my hand when I was five years old. It was he who instilled a love of solving problems in me. My favorite activity as a child was to take apart furniture and put it back together. As I grew up, my father taught me that it was important to find out why something was broken before fixing it. It took becoming a minister for me to understand the larger lesson he taught me.

Growing up, I was often chastised for asking too many questions. Often by people who did not want to delve too much into “why” something was happening. It rarely stopped me, because I understood that if I did not question things, I could not learn. A lot of this questioning and learning led me along a very circuitous route to Unitarian Universalism. Looking back now, I see I needed lessons and tools from all the places I called spiritual homes.

When I joined my first Unitarian Universalist congregation, I remember being constantly surprised at the things that were deemed unnecessary. When I inquired about joining the church, I was taken to the office to sign the membership book. I was not required to attend any membership classes, even though I had never attended a UU congregation before. As I was told, their reasoning was that I had been a youth minister years before, so I knew what it meant to belong to a congregation. Even when I asked about opportunities for faith formation, I was offered website links and access to the

congregational library. That moment stuck with me as I finally answered the call to ministry and entered seminary.

After helping out at new member classes at different congregations, I discovered that everyone does it differently. One congregation offered three in-depth sessions, allowing potential new members a chance to meet the leadership and get to know one another. Another congregation offered a one-afternoon-long meeting where a brief history of the congregation along with explanations of governance and activities was all that was offered. Other congregations would offer a pre-made curriculum for new members, and yet others had a loose outline for structure. Since Unitarian Universalism is structured under congregational polity, each congregation sets its own standards for membership. This may not seem like a problem until people move to another city and find another UU congregation. Then, conflicting information about what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist can lead to conflict.

This project came from my own wonderings as I virtually attended the Unitarian Universalist Association's General Assembly in 2019. I watched in awe and horror as arguments began to bubble up about who we are and whom we include. Micro-aggressions turned into aggressions as a document was passed around that caused harm to BIPOC and LGBTQ+ Unitarian Universalists. The schisms we were seeing in our country were beginning to fracture our denomination. Something was broken, and I needed to know why.

I began to wonder why there were so many conflicting statements on what it meant to be a Unitarian Universalist. For some, it was about intellectualism and individual freedom. For others, it was about living out our values in social action and

justice. There were as many descriptions of what it meant to be a member of a Unitarian Universalist congregation as there were members in the whole of the UUA. As I began to preach on our denomination's history, I realized we were missing some common understanding. This project grew out of that wondering whether a lack of common foundational knowledge was contributing to the strife.

In the years it took to create and implement this project, the lines have become more staunchly drawn and sometimes more divisive and aggressive. My hope is this project will help as a tool to let us begin at a common understanding of what it means to be a practicing Unitarian Universalist. To do the work we are called to do to create a just and equitable world, we must be grounded in our faith.

This paper begins with the point of synergy between my own faith journey and the context in which I find myself. While this project was completed in a singular congregation, the Unitarian Universalist Association sets the context more widely. This first chapter analyzes that context, including the current challenges and strengths. Much like my father putting tools in my hand, this combination of my own journey and where I find myself at this stage of ministry has informed the entire DMin project.

The Biblical Foundations chapter explores 1 Corinthians 12:12-26. In this pericope the Apostle Paul upends the current thinking of the time and reminds the new church that those who come to the table are to be seen as equals. This chapter begins the building of this project by exploring one of the many scriptural references mentioned in the foundational documents for Congregationalist churches in the New World.

The Historical Foundations chapter introduces the Cambridge Platform. This document set up how Congregationalist churches would be with one another. The

Cambridge Platform is the foundation of congregational polity as it is practiced in UU congregations today. Understanding this history is essential for Unitarian Universalists today if we are to survive as a denomination.

The Theological Foundations chapter takes the work explored to another level, exploring the theology of covenant as understood by the Congregationalists and how it is expressed today within UU congregations. Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal, non-creedal faith that surrounds and girds all we do. An entire session of the final project explored this concept with participants.

The Interdisciplinary Foundations chapter looks at Family Systems Theory since it is crucial to understand this as one works to create change in a troubled system. Make no mistake, the UUA is currently in trouble, as evidenced by multiple Commission reports, as explained throughout this paper. Understanding the way the systems within a church work will aid anyone looking to become a change agent.

The final chapter explains the final project, “What Does it Mean to be a Practicing Unitarian Universalist?” This project was a six-week course covering the material usually covered quickly in a half-day class for new members. The final project's inspiration came from my experience in discipleship courses in other faith traditions. In addition to explaining the structure of the class, this chapter explains the questions asked of participants, including before, during and after the project. Finally, I share the data collected and the conclusions I came to understand as well as next steps to take this further.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

Introduction

This chapter will explain how God has led me through my past ministerial and educational experiences to this point in time in Unitarian Universalism to create a project that will live on beyond both my Doctor of Ministry degree and myself. Over the years, I have realized that I am a natural storyteller and teacher. In my itinerant preaching introduction, I state that I am a Unitarian Universalist Evangelist, sharing the good news of our liberal and liberating faith. I often explain that this means that I live my life so that people can see what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. It does not mean I do not struggle; it means I continue daily to renew my covenant with God and those around me.

These skills of storytelling and teaching and this passion for Unitarian Universalism both call me to help others be passionate and grounded in their faith, so they can then feel confident explaining Unitarian Universalism to others. As they are currently, our membership classes are not structured enough, nor are they consistent across the denomination. Individual Membership Committees create these classes and focus exclusively on that congregation. My project works much like a discipleship class structure, moving participants through all aspects of the Unitarian Universalist faith and helping them build a firm foundation upon which to grow.

Context

Unitarian Universalism itself is a relatively newer denomination. In 1961, the Unitarian and Universalist faith traditions merged to become the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), a “voluntary association of autonomous, self-governing member congregations, which have freely chosen to pursue common goals together.”¹

Congregations covenant to join the UUA and are certified as member congregations every year by holding regular religious services, maintaining and reporting membership numbers, holding an annual business meeting for the congregation, and making a financial contribution to the UUA.² Once certified, each congregation has a certain number of delegates based on their membership size. Along with any ministerial and professional religious education delegates, these delegates then vote in the annual General Assembly, where the Association’s business meeting occurs.³

We are an aspirational faith, covenanting together to affirm and promote Seven Principles about who we will be both together and in the world. These Principles are printed at the beginning of our bylaws, inside the front cover of our hymnal, and many congregations print them in their bulletins and on their websites. The Seven Principles of the UUA are:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

¹ “Bylaws and Rules: As Amended Through December 1, 2020,” Unitarian Universalist Association, http://www.uua.org/files/2020-12/uua_bylaws_2020.pdf, Section C-3.1.

² “Bylaws and Rules, 2020,” Section C-3.5.

³ “Bylaws and Rules, 2020,” Sections C-4.7-4.9.

5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.⁴

These Principles are not a creed, and they are not a checklist. They are a continual aspiration for how we wish to be in the world. We do not always get it right. Currently, the UUA is taking a hard look at its own inherent white supremacy culture and how we have failed our siblings of color. The Reverend Susan Frederick-Gray, immediate Past-President of the UUA, says, “we are called to put our values, our relationships, and all our spiritual resources to the work of wholeness. Together, imperfectly, we work to build communities and practices of inclusion, care, growth, and love.”⁵

While the work we do around anti-racism, anti-oppression, and multiculturalism is at the forefront of our social justice work and the work within our communities, we are struggling. We should be a natural home for those who are “spiritual but not religious,” and yet Unitarian Universalism has not kept up with population growth. At the time of our merger in 1961, there were 1,035 churches with a membership of 229,103 people. Seven years after the merger, Unitarian Universalist churches reached a peak with 1,135 churches and 282,307 members. However, in 1979, we were at our lowest with 988 churches and 176,352 members. Three years later, the number of churches increased to 999, but membership dropped to 171,609. Certification data for 2020 showed 1,027 churches and 187,689 members.⁶ While some decline in 2020 is expected due to the

⁴ “Bylaws and Rules,” Section C-2.1.

⁵ Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, “Preface,” in *Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*, ed. Rev. Susan-Frederick-Gray (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2019), xv.

⁶ “UUA Membership Statistics, 1961-2020,” Unitarian Universalist Association, <http://www.uua.org/data/demographics/uua-statistics>.

pandemic sending all UUA congregations to virtual services, it is still part of a steady decline since 2012.

One reason for this is the loss of our youth after reaching adulthood. The 2005 Commission on Appraisal reported that we lose around eighty-five percent of our youth.⁷ This can be attributed to many reasons, but one the Commission lifted up is the lack of spiritual and theological conversations in the adult congregation:

Without a means of spiritual exploration through communities and practices, the church will continue to lose youth, young adults, and older adults who feel spiritually unfulfilled by standard UU fare. At the same time, UUs need to take great care in administering and promoting such communities so as not to drive away those folks who see their UU congregation as their bastion of protection against these very things in the larger society.⁸

Besides the youth leaving, many adults who consider themselves “spiritual but not religious” are either not finding Unitarian Universalist congregations or are and find them lacking spirituality. At the same time, while our Principles state that we affirm and promote the “acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations,”⁹ that does not always bear out in practice. Individual congregational culture depends on what the majority of the congregation believes, whether that is theist or non-theist or somewhere in between. However, sometimes, it is not the sheer numbers that tilt a congregation humanist or spiritual, but the beliefs of the more involved members with both time and donations. These members volunteer for the committees which prepare worship and programming, thus keeping their belief system forefront.

⁷ Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity* (Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2005), 36.

⁸ Commission on Appraisal, *Theological Diversity*, 144.

⁹ “Bylaws and Rules, 2020,” Section C-2.1.

There needs to be a deeper understanding of our shared theology and meaning behind what we do so that all are welcome at our table. Meg Riley states:

Radical caring calls us to create truly inclusive congregations. Many Unitarian Universalists can name the time when, because of a deepening connection to our faith community, we were suddenly able to relax, to know that all our edges were accepted, that we did not have to choose which of our identities we could safely allow into the room. How do our congregations let people know that they are in such places – especially in today’s landscape, with its variety of cultures, languages, musical forms, metaphors, stories, political analyses, and other differences?¹⁰

Finally, Unitarian Universalists need to have a firm grounding in what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. This includes our history as separate denominations before 1961 and our shared history since the merger. It includes both the good and bad history around the white supremacy culture within and without our movement. It includes learning about and from the misogyny in our history. It also means learning about our theological history and how that brought us out of the congregationalist churches and eventually to where we are today. We need to understand the *why* behind the *what* that we do. We need to understand the diversity of beliefs within Unitarian Universalism.

Paul Rasor stated:

We cannot strengthen our prophetic practice unless we reclaim its religious dimensions. Our prophetic practice is rooted in the theological principles and mutual obligations that shape our covenant and define our shared faith tradition. We need to speak out not simply as liberals, but as religious liberals. Supporting liberal causes and taking liberal positions on political and social issues are not enough – we need to show that these positions are religiously grounded. We need to come out of our religious closets. Reclaiming our religious voice will strengthen our justice-making activities and help reestablish Unitarian Universalism’s critical role in an era that badly needs it.¹¹

¹⁰ Meg Riley, “Prophetic Congregations in the Twenty-First Century,” in *A People So Bold: Theology and Ministry for Unitarian Universalists*, ed. John Gibb Millspaugh (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2010), 4-5.

¹¹ Paul Rasor, “Identity, Covenant and Commitment,” in *A People So Bold: Theology and Ministry for Unitarian Universalists*, ed. John Gibb Millspaugh (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2010), 15-16.

If Unitarian Universalism is to survive, it must begin, at the local congregational level, to teach and guide new seekers and members to ground themselves in both the intellectual and spiritual aspects of this faith. In 2005, the Commission on Appraisal recommended curricula on this very topic:

The Commission recommends that the Association as a whole mobilize a denomination-wide effort, building upon the findings of this report, to develop and articulate a deeper understanding of who Unitarian Universalists are as a religious people and what shared commitments the UU faith calls us to affirm as well as what challenges we face at this particular time.¹²

Unfortunately, this has not happened in the way the Commission recommended. A few curricula are available on the UUA's website that would fit this need, but there has not been an effort to mobilize this as a denomination-wide effort. Some congregations accuse the UUA of prescribing to them, so often the UUA and even regional leads back off from suggesting things that would be beneficial.¹³ Curricula and other resources located on the website are for free use by congregations, but many do not take advantage of it. Through various adult education committees at congregations, I have heard that the curricula are too confusing to use, too burdensome with the number of activities listed, or not attractive enough for congregants to sign up.

Ministry Journey

I have experienced many different congregations as a guest preacher throughout my Unitarian Universalist ministry experience. This experience has allowed me to spot

¹² Commission on Appraisal, *Theological Diversity*, 140.

¹³ Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association, *Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity* (Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1997), 65-66.

trends throughout the local congregations that a traditional parish minister might not be able to see while settled with a single congregation. One of those trends I have noticed is a lack of knowledge about our history. During the 2020-21 church year, I preached two sermons to four congregations about our historical and recent issues around white supremacy culture and our historical issues around misogyny within the ministry. After each service, there would be either a time for questions or a coffee hour where people could chat about the sermon in a less structured way. Each time, I would hear people tell me they had been a Unitarian Universalist for a long time but never knew these stories.

Another trend I have witnessed in my time with other congregations is the lack of understanding of theological diversity. I often use the term theist to describe my beliefs to congregations, but if pressed, I go further and say that I am and always have been a Universalist at heart and a follower of Jesus. I do not consider myself a Christian simply because I am also a Unitarian, and therefore, I do not fit in with the definition of Christian. I do, however, believe in the commandments Jesus taught, to love God and to love your neighbor. The greatest commandment for me is love. Every time I have the opportunity for this deeper conversation, I find that it riles up some congregants, but it also makes room for other congregants to talk about their spiritual paths. It saddens me that this likely does not often happen in those congregations, except in small groups of like-minded people.

I am passionate about faith development and am introduced to congregations as a “UU Evangelist” because I believe in sharing the good news of our liberal and liberating faith. My preaching and teaching style has been described as rich in storytelling and metaphor and broken down so that complicated things are easier to understand. I believe

that some of this came naturally to me as I have always enjoyed being a storyteller to get information across. For a time, I was a Mass Communications major studying television production and working at the on-campus PBS station in both production and broadcasting. I wanted to be a documentary film producer, to tell stories that I found fascinating in a way that many people could understand. During the Covid-19 pandemic, I made sure that all my sermons had a storytelling element and a pastoral element. People were struggling and needed information given to them in an easy-to-process manner. I believe that congregations must embrace technology to move into the future. As we saw during the pandemic, having services, classes, and meetings available online allowed more people to participate who might not have before. People who are homebound for many reasons, people who live further away than is feasible to drive, and busy people who cannot take time out to commute and attend meetings; technology allows these groups to participate. There is also the consideration of how people learn and that a visual component is essential not only for worship but also for classes.

For a short period in my early twenties, I was a daycare and elementary school teacher. One of the things I loved about this age group was setting up the foundation of learning for these students. Laying foundational lessons is essential because, without a good foundation, people cannot build a robust framework from which to live. Foundational studies are not just for children, however. I believe that adults can learn foundational lessons, allowing them to grow. This Doctor of Ministry project allowed me to use that passion for foundation building to give Unitarian Universalists somewhere to stand to build their theology and faith and spiritual development.

Without a foundational structure of shared history and theology, individuals cannot fully consent to covenant together in congregations. Once they understand what covenant and our shared congregational polity mean, they can move forward to understand those things that bind us together as Unitarian Universalists. A structured approach to this, made available to all congregations, will help us attract and maintain new members looking for a home with us.

The Synergy

Topic

Throughout this project, I explored the basic concept of discipleship and what that means for a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Many Unitarian Universalists, even those “born-in” to the denomination, do not have a firm grasp of our history before and after the merger. Not only that but there is a lack of complete understanding of congregational polity. The 1997 Commission on Appraisal, which focused on congregational polity, reported, “we believe that an inadequate understanding or development of polity is often at the root of these unresolved institutional concerns or problems.”¹⁴ Likewise, the 2005 Commission, in their report on theological diversity, reported, “Unitarian Universalists need to make peace with their heritage.”¹⁵

It is not just about our shared history and heritage. While we state we are a people who embrace theological pluralism, we sometimes fall short in how we live up to that

¹⁴ Commission on Appraisal, *Interdependence*, 63.

¹⁵ Commission on Appraisal, *Theological Diversity*, 86.

ideal. The 2005 Commission recommended “that the UUA take steps at all levels to ensure that UU congregations are theologically safe places.”¹⁶ They also recommended “a direct approach to dealing with the theological reactivity that is so prevalent regarding Unitarian Universalism’s Christian origins.”¹⁷ The 2005 Commission on Appraisal reported about the state of the curricula at that time in their report:

Many UU congregations offer adult religious education opportunities, but a cursory review of the existing curricula shows that they are slanted toward the intellectual and the historical and include few opportunities for the achievement of spiritual depth. There is no clear path of devotional, meditative, or spiritual practice that is made available through most UU congregations.¹⁸

While these recommendations came out in 2005, only three curricula were added to the Tapestry of Faith resources for adults that addressed these recommendations. *Spirit in Practice* was published in 2008 and addressed the need for regular spiritual practice in adults. *Spirit of Life* was published in 2010, and its purpose was to help adults explore their spirituality. *What Moves Us: Unitarian Universalist Theology*, published in 2013, seems to be the closest to what the Commission recommended to the UUA.¹⁹ While these curricula are available to all congregations for free on the UUA website, it is unknown how many congregations have used them or have used them completely. All curricula allow for a “pick and choose” setup, making it easy for the instructors to align it closer to the congregational culture and not expand past growing edges.

¹⁶ Commission on Appraisal, *Theological Diversity*, 145.

¹⁷ Commission on Appraisal, *Theological Diversity*, 147.

¹⁸ Commission on Appraisal, *Theological Diversity*, 143.

¹⁹ “Tapestry of Faith Curricula,” Unitarian Universalist Association, <http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry>.

Skills and Interests

While my goal is that this project will turn into something that can go denomination-wide, I conducted the project in the congregation I serve as a minister. They have witnessed my passion for this concept and are also interested in it, so I was able to gather a significant sample size for the project. They see me as a natural storyteller and teacher and have recently enjoyed sermons about our history that I have preached there. I continued to use my storytelling skills to present the material and engaged with all participants. As an instructor, I am conversational, gently guiding my students to take things a bit deeper by telling their own stories around topics. I genuinely believe what Victoria Safford said about the need for stories:

This is what I have come to believe about human beings: We require food, water, shelter, air, and stories. Something in us needs to speak and to be heard, to forgive and be forgiven, to sing and hear music, to speak our truth and listen for the truths of others. Because we are human beings – religious human beings, bound to one another and to sacred mystery – part of our calling is to aid and abet the transmission of beauty and truth.²⁰

Project Content

This project is a six-week Unitarian Universalist discipleship course. Before and after the course, participants answered a series of questions to determine their understanding of Unitarian Universalist concepts taught in the course. This allowed me to judge if the course increased participants' knowledge.

The course itself was six sessions, each session lasting two hours. In the introductory information about the class, participants were informed of the time

²⁰ Victoria Safford, "The Sacraments of the Word and Celebration," in *A People So Bold: Theology and Ministry for Unitarian Universalists*, ed. John Gibb Millspaugh (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2010), 96.

commitment and the importance of their attendance. Participants were asked to fill in a journal provided to them to answer data-collection questions as well as take notes. I gained valuable information about what worked and what did not in the class to improve it for future publication.

The first session was about Universalist, Unitarian, and Unitarian Universalist history. Typically, in a new member class, this topic is given a brief fifteen-minute overview which is never enough time for people to get a clear foundation of where the denomination has been and where it is hoping to go. This class session also touched on the many places we have gotten it wrong in terms of racism, oppression, and lack of diversity. It is essential to know our mistakes to inform and change our future. As the Unitarian Universalist Association has focused on anti-racism, anti-oppression, and multiculturalism for the past few years, this class session tied into that and helped ground participants into this work.

The second session was about theology: the theology of our Unitarian and Universalist forebearers and an understanding of the various theologies that people may bring with them to Unitarian Universalism. We explored ways to unpack theologies they brought from childhood, which may no longer serve them, and build their personal theologies. Theology is such an important topic but it often is never brought up in congregational settings. However, as Meg Riley reminds us, theology is the bedrock of what we do:

Our theology is deeply incarnational: our faith and spirituality are based in earthly, this-world daily engagement with the holy. Each night a child is born is holy, we say, rather than locating holiness only in the birth of Jesus. There is a priesthood of all believers, we say, rather than locating all wisdom in those who are ordained. UUs understand salvation to take place not elsewhere, after we are dead, but in our daily choices today, in this world. The world is not an evil, sinful

place we would be lucky to leave for some pure, godly place. Come what may after our deaths, we have cast our lot with those gods and mortals committed to creating together what is holy right here in the incomprehensibly beautiful, horrifically broken, frighteningly vulnerable, miraculous place we call home.²¹

It is this sentiment that I hoped students emerged from the class on theology with, as it is this sentiment that is, in my opinion, what Unitarian Universalism is all about.

The third session focused on spiritual practices, both individual and communal. Often, this is one of the “babies” thrown out with the bathwater when people “come in” to Unitarian Universalism from traditions that have harmed them. The ability to find and experiment with practices that will bring them closer to God, Source, the Universe, the Great Mystery, or to calm and center themselves is an important one to have.

The fourth session focused on congregational polity and the UUA. There is much confusion about what congregational polity means, and this class addressed that. Often, congregational polity is understood in light of the rights given to congregations: to call their own ministers, own their own buildings, and conduct their own business. However, congregational polity also means there are responsibilities to reach out to both support and admonish other congregations as necessary. My experience has been that many congregations feel they are in competition with one another for members instead of looking for ways to work together to serve the community’s needs. The connections that congregations have within their community and other congregations in their state, the region, and the country, are vital if we are to continue to survive.

The fifth session focused on our Principles and Sources, which we have covenanted together to affirm and promote. Most Unitarian Universalists can easily state

²¹ Riley, “Prophetic Congregations,” 2-3.

the first and seventh Principles but often struggle to remember the others or fully understand them. It is a similar situation with the Sources, in that congregations tend to pick and choose which sources they wish to use and which they tend to ignore. A complete understanding of the breadth and depth of these sources is necessary as it leads to better theological diversity. During the course of this project, we also discussed the upcoming changes to Article II of the bylaws, where the Principles and Sources reside.

The sixth and final session was planned to deal with the individual congregation's history and governance and what activities are available for members. Saving the individual congregation's information for last allows new members to see how this particular congregation fits into the wider Unitarian Universalist world. It also allows new members to make an informed choice before they sign the membership book.

I hope that this entire set of classes will replace the new member classes that congregations teach in one, two, or three afternoons. Many of those classes only deal with the individual congregation and spend about twenty minutes total on any of the other topics I taught. This curriculum will give a stronger foundation to help new members fully understand what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist and what it means to be a member of that congregation.

Hopeful Learnings

One of the main things I hope to learn through this project is whether there is a structured way to help Unitarian Universalists feel more grounded in their faith. One of the current issues with many of the Tapestry of Faith curricula is that they have many small segments in the class structure that only touch on the topic without leaving enough

time for reflection and discussion. This causes instructors to drop elements they may have planned on or cut the discussion short to stay on time. Students should be responsible for reading provided materials and preparing for class when doing this kind of deep-dive work. Pre-class preparation leaves more time for discussion, leading to people sharing stories and learning more profoundly.

Another thing I hope to learn is whether an instructor can teach this heavy material in such an entertaining way without being silly and helpful without being overbearing. In the 2014 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center of the Unitarian Universalists and “other liberal faiths in the ‘other faiths’ tradition” surveyed, thirty-two percent had some college, twenty-two percent had a college degree, and eighteen percent had a post-graduate degree. Only twenty-nine percent reported having a high school diploma or less.²² Instruction will need to engage those who have post-graduate degrees and be approachable and accessible to those who do not. This can be achieved with engaging storytelling by the instructor and time for deep reflection and interaction with the students.

Finally, I hope to learn how best to guide Unitarian Universalists into a deeper faith, one that makes them proud to be UU Evangelists in their communities. As Unitarian Universalists become more grounded in what they believe and who they are, their social justice work and interfaith connections will become richer. The 2005 Commission on Appraisal stated, “In the mature religious journey, reaching within and reaching beyond are yoked movements. Evangelism is the outcome of embodied

²² “Unitarians and Other Liberal Faiths in ‘Other Faiths’ Tradition,” Religious Landscape Study, Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-family/unitarians-and-other-liberal-faiths-in-the-other-faiths-tradition/>.

theology.”²³ I genuinely believe that my call to ministry is about preparing people for this evangelism by finding ways for them to grow roots and wings in their Unitarian Universalist faith.

Conclusion

The problem is that Unitarian Universalist congregations do not spend adequate time teaching members what it means to be a practicing Unitarian Universalist. This leads to the rampant individualism evident in Unitarian Universalism today, which blocks us from creating alliances within our congregations and outside in the larger community and the UUA.²⁴

I hypothesize that Unitarian Universalist congregations struggle to grow because the members do not have a firm grounding in what it means to be a practicing Unitarian Universalist. If they had this grounding, then they would be more confident living their values and telling people about Unitarian Universalism. In seminary, we were encouraged to write our own “elevator pitch” of what it meant to be a Unitarian Universalist. My elevator pitch has developed into “God is One. God is Love. We all have a divine spark within us, so treat others well.” I often ask other Unitarian Universalists to give me their elevator pitch, but they struggle. If we cannot express this among ourselves, how do we expect to tell other people about this liberal and liberating faith?

²³ Commission on Appraisal, *Theological Diversity*, 131.

²⁴ Commission on Appraisal, *Interdependence*, 56.

In closing, I am inspired by the following quote from Marilyn Sewell about what we must do to move forward:

Unitarian Universalists, though few in number, can be the yeast in the loaf. However, let us be wary of the usual distractions and follies of our movement. It's grown-up time now. We no longer prioritize petty quarrels about how "religious" our language should be, conflicts between the humanists and the more spiritually inclined, or squabbles about who is in charge. The mission of the church is not to meet our needs; the mission of the church is to heal our world. It is to give of ourselves to something larger than ourselves. Ironically, when we give of ourselves in this way, we find that our deepest needs are met.²⁵

I believe that the time has come for a Unitarian Universalist Discipleship Program that will help move us beyond these petty squabbles and move us forward to live out the Principles we covenant to affirm and promote. As we work to learn who we indeed are and who we are meant to be, we will heal ourselves and past traumas and heal the world. I believe that God has called me to this ministry. I believe God has uniquely placed me into this place and time to create such a program.

²⁵ Marilyn Sewell, "Reimagining the American Dream," in *A People So Bold: Theology and Ministry for Unitarian Universalists*, ed. John Gibb Millspaugh (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2010), 80.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

The passage I have selected for my Biblical Foundation is 1 Corinthians 12:12-26. This passage speaks to me as a Unitarian Universalist because we, as congregations within the broader association, often struggle with the diversity of our pluralistic faith tradition. This section of Paul's letter to the Corinthian church speaks to the issues around race, class, and in my context, issues around theology as well.

First Corinthians 12:12-26 reads as follows:

¹²For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care

for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.¹

The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) regularly tasks groups of ministers and laypeople to research a pressing topic within the UUA. From 2017 to 2020, the Commission on Institutional Change (COIC) looked at issues around diversity within the congregations and the UUA. As I reviewed their report, the following quote resonated with both my project and my pericope choice:

The status quo within our world today reinforces a system in which some are treated as “greater than” and others as “less than.” This status quo is also reflected in our congregations and denominational lives. To counter this takes more than good intent; it takes a faithful commitment to a different way of being, accountability to our broader community and the world we seek to engage.²

This status quo that the COIC mentions is rampant within the individual congregations that make up the UUA. It often presents itself as a lack of diversity: racial, social status, and theology. Many congregations are upper-middle-class, highly educated, and often humanist or non-theist. There is a lack of understanding of the history of Unitarians and Universalists and how those theological backgrounds shape our collective “theological container.” The COIC reminds us that because “much of the preserved theological work is from white theologians and scholars, we also need to re-engage that work through contemporary lenses.”³ They continue to report that “many who have abandoned our faith as lay or professional leaders because of our inability to articulate

¹ Unless otherwise indicated all Bible references in this paper are from the New Revised Standard Edition (NRSV) (US: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1989).

² UUA Commission on Institutional Change, *Widening the Circle of Concern* (Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2020), 10-12.

³ UUA COIC, *Widening the Circle*, 15.

and implement a faith-based approach to our anti-oppression work.”⁴ It is through this lens that I approach Paul and the church in Corinth.

History

Corinth itself was Greek until 146 B.C.E. when the Romans defeated it.⁵ In 44 B.C.E., “Caesar populated the colony with numerous freedmen and legionary veterans, but the ethnic mix was more diverse by Paul's day, including Syrians and Egyptians, along with Greeks who had immigrated from surrounding cities.”⁶ While on the surface, it seems that Corinth was abandoned between 146 and 44 B.C.E., more recent archeological evidence shows while there were no established civic institutions, there were continuing occupations and evidence of artifacts showing the continued use of the Greek language in the population.⁷

Corinth was in the perfect position for sharing the message of the Gospel. It was located at a crossroads and dominated two harbors.⁸ With this location, messages transmitted would be able to travel quickly beyond Corinth’s borders. But unfortunately,

⁴ UUA COIC, *Widening the Circle*, 24.

⁵ David G. Horrel, “Corinth,” Places, Bible Odyssey, <https://www.bibleodyssey.org:443/places/main-articles/corinth>.

⁶ Laurence L. Welborn, “The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians,” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 4th ed., ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1999.

⁷ Horrel, “Corinth.”

⁸ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Anchor Yale Bible; Vol. 32: First Corinthians* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 21.

this location also provided a way to generate significant wealth for a few people, leading to inequality within the population and the church itself.⁹

In the first century C.E., Corinth was full of many different identities due to the combination of Greek culture, language, and religion shaped by the Roman colonization.¹⁰ The city, and therefore the church, had both slave and free, rich and poor, Jews and Gentiles, and both Greeks and Romans. It was in this situation that Paul wrote this letter to the church in Corinth.

Paul's effort in 1 Corinthians is about pulling these diverse groups into not just a community but a society where everyone is equal and fully participating in the church.¹¹ This was no easy task. While Paul loved the members of the Corinthian church as a parent loves their children, he also worried about them and the danger of them succumbing to following the ways of those around them. Their party rivalry within the church caused them to be divided over leadership.¹² Earlier in the letter, Paul brings this up by saying, "For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ'" (1 Cor 1:11-12). These leaders were charismatic and drew people to them.

⁹ Steven J. Friesen, Sarah James, and David Schowalter, eds., "Inequality," in *Corinth in Contrast* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, October 2013), doi:<https://doi-org.del.lbm.oclc.org/10.1163/9789004261310>, 8.

¹⁰ Horrel, "Corinth."

¹¹ J. Paul Stanley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians," *New Interpreter's Bible*, 12 vols. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998), 10:788.

¹² Ralph P. Martin, *The Spirit and the Congregation: Studies in 1 Corinthians 12-15* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1984), 143.

Paul was what we call now bi-vocational: he preached the Gospel and worked as a tentmaker. These two professions worked well together as Paul likely had a workshop where he made the tents. This workshop was a quiet environment, perfect for conversations about Jesus with both strangers and friends. It also provided a place for small meetings.¹³

While this set-up seems ideal for evangelism, Paul faced a lot of issues in Corinth.

According to John Barclay, two factors diminished Paul's influence:

First, some of his own or subsequent converts were people of education and high social standing who developed independent views about the meaning of the Christian message (e.g., in relation to the resurrection of the body and sexual behaviour) and whose integration in Corinthian society made them reluctant to accept Paul's more sectarian social practices (e.g., in relation to sacrificial food). Secondly, situated at an international crossroads, the church in Corinth was visited by a variety of Christian leaders, some of whom won converts of their own and assisted the church to develop in ways of which Paul disapproved (e.g., Apollos and, probably, Peter/Cephas, 1:12; 9:4-5).¹⁴

Even with these two factors, it is essential to note that Paul never chooses to sacrifice individuality and variety for community and sameness. Instead, he lifts the uniqueness of individuals and what they bring to the community to make it thrive. Diversity is what grows a community.¹⁵

¹³ Steve Walton, "Corinth in Acts: Paul's Financial Support," Places, Bible Odyssey, <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/places/related-articles/corinth-in-acts-pauls-financial-support>.

¹⁴ John Barclay, "I Corinthians," in *Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. by John Barton and John Muddiman, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), ProQuest Books, 1109.

¹⁵ Stanley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians," 10:787.

Text

This letter to the Corinthians was not the first letter Paul wrote to them. This letter is a reply to a letter sent by the Corinthians and references Paul's first letter to them. First Corinthians was written while Paul was in Ephesus, early in the year 57, before Pentecost. It gave him time to comment on the various reports and questions sent to him. However, this letter was not well received, and we see in 2 Corinthians that Paul's relationship with the church in Corinth worsened.¹⁶ Paul works in both letters to maintain unity and order over fragmentation. In this letter to the Corinthians, "the fracture lines run between members of the congregation in areas such as the status of groups and individuals, litigation, marriage, food, idolatry, the Lord's Supper, and spiritual gifts."¹⁷

The arguments made in 1 Corinthians are "for unity that honors distinctiveness and diversity; for the believers' proper care of one another, which at the same time is grounded in an accurate self-assessment; and for the formation and upbuilding of maturity of faith that leaves no one out."¹⁸ The divisiveness of the Corinthian church comes primarily out of its members failing to respect the diversity within the community.¹⁹ This honoring of diversity within the unity of a community leads us to the pericope, which is the focus of this paper.

The image of the church as a body, as found in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26, is used by Paul to explain the dependence members have for one another, even when they differ

¹⁶ Fitzmyer, *Anchor Yale Bible*, 43.

¹⁷ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), ProQuest Ebook Central, 165.

¹⁸ Stanley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians," 789.

¹⁹ Yung Suk Kim, *Christ's Body in Corinth: The Politics of a Metaphor*, (Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media, 2008), <https://doi-org.dtl.idm.oclc.org/10.2307/j.ctv1hqdhTO>, 4.

culturally, socially, and by their spiritual gifts. These differences would usually cause members to pull away from one another. Here, Paul reminds the church “for in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:13). Therefore, they were to be committed to one another because “the nature of their fellowship life is far more profound than when people gather because they merely have a common interest or wish to pursue a common goal.”²⁰ This is the heart of a church community. Thus, the members made a choice to be baptized into the church and become a family.

Paul spends time comparing the body of Christ, of the church, to a physical body. This was a commonly used metaphor for society because it was an organism with diverse yet independent parts. The ruling classes often exploited this metaphor to remind those groups deemed inferior of their place and purpose (to do their part for everyone). However, Paul uses this metaphor to point out that there are no inferior or superior parts in the body of Christ.²¹

Yung Suk Kim describes the original fable Paul appears to be referencing:

The fable of Menenius Agrippa's speech, retold by Livy, a Roman historian in the first century B.C.E., also reveals the ideology of the ruling class. In the fable, the lower body parts (hands, feet, etc.) rebelled against the stomach because the stomach consumes everything without working at all. The point of complaint and rebellion is unfairness or inequality. But the rebelling parts are told to continue to work for the body; otherwise, not only the stomach but the whole body will be destroyed. The rhetoric of the fable emphasizes the hierarchical unity of the social body. But the question is, did this rhetoric of “concord” (or unity) take into account the marginalized or the oppressed? And how did the marginalized respond to it?²²

²⁰ James C. Wilhoit and Leland Ryken, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), ProQuest Ebook Central, 148.

²¹ Barclay, “I Corinthians,” 1127-28.

²² Kim, *Christ's Body in Corinth*, 44.

In using this known story as the basis for his metaphor, Paul reminds the church community that they are no longer following the same rules as society. Here, they are to care for one another, sharing burdens and joys as one, as God has directed. Regardless of what made them strong, the strong members care for and protect the weak members for the church to function. The more vulnerable members are to receive the honor, turning the social mores on their heads.²³

It is, however, easy to look at this section of 1 Corinthians as simple discourse, speaking on a unity formed within a hierarchy. However, when one reads this passage from the perspective of the marginalized, we see that Paul is speaking out against the status quo of the elites.²⁴ As can be seen in many churches today, a small elite group can influence the entire congregation. In Corinth, this group interpreted the Christian faith through their class-determined lenses and caused many issues Paul addresses in this letter.²⁵

In his commentary on 1 Corinthians in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, J. Paul Stanley gives us this insight into the problems in Corinth:

Churches, like other social groups, are subject to fractiousness from all sorts of sources, and Corinth certainly had its share. Whether it is wealthy persons treating the poorer with disdain, or especially religiously gifted persons becoming arrogant, prideful, and disdainful of those less gifted, or persons of whatever socioeconomic bracket who think first of themselves and little about the needs of others, or persons who overestimate how strong they are in faith, or persons who

²³ Timothy L. Carter, "Looking at the Metaphor of Christ's Body in 1 Corinthians 12," in *Paul: Jew, Greek, and Roman*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2008), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004171596.i-370>, 106, 114.

²⁴ Kim, *Christ's Body in Corinth*, 30-1.

²⁵ Barclay, "1 Corinthians," 1109.

have low self-esteem and cower timidly before those they consider more advanced – the list could go on – the church at Corinth has them all.²⁶

While I cannot speak to other denominations and faith traditions, I can say that this is visible even today within Unitarian Universalism. In my experience with various local congregations, the members with the most money and power are looked to for all decision making, bad behavior by these members is often overlooked to allow donations to continue, and members who have less money to give are pushed to provide more of their time and talent, at times creating a second-class membership level.

The body metaphor, as described earlier, would have been known to the original readers of Paul's letter. It is likely they had heard the original play and understood its message that the weaker parts support the more important parts. In this text, we see Paul establishing a different point, rather that there can be both diversity and unity in one body.

First Corinthians 12:12 is where Paul sets up his thesis statement: "It takes many different *members* to make up one human body. The members differ inevitably. But their differences do not affect the fact that there is a fundamental unity."²⁷ Paul is stating here in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13 that regardless of how different the members of the Corinthian church are, they are all part of one body and one spirit.²⁸ "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks,

²⁶ Stanley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians," 788.

²⁷ Leon Morris, *TNTC 1 Corinthians* (Nottingham: IVP, 2008), ProQuest Ebook Central, 173.

²⁸ Stanley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians," 945.

slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:12-13). J. Paul

Stanley states it this way:

Paul’s implication is that as surely as individual differences, such as ethnicity and social status, were rendered “indifferent” or of no importance by the working of the Spirit in their baptism where they became one, so also any distinctions in terms of being members with distinctive characteristics and functions have no significance.²⁹

An important distinction that Paul makes is that diversity is no accident. In 1 Corinthians 12:14, he says, “Indeed, the body does not consist of one member, but of many.” The very essence of the body is its diversity.³⁰ It is this diversity that allows the body to complete its daily functions. Paul states through the following few verses that the body cannot function if it is all one eye or one foot. The individuality of believers in the church is raised as Paul explains how each person serves the body of Christ, the church, in distinct ways. No way is greater or less than the other, as they are all needed.

The “one body” metaphor is a ring device. Two metaphors are used to mirror one another to make a point. Paul uses it twice to make two different points. The first metaphor (v15-17) is used for the members who have low self-esteem. Paul reassures them of their place within the body:

If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? (1 Cor 12:15-17)

²⁹ Stanley, “The First Letter to the Corinthians,” 945.

³⁰ Morris, *TNTC 1 Corinthians*, 174.

The second metaphor (v21-24) is used to address those who think of themselves better than others. But, again, Paul reminds them that everyone is equally important:

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this (1 Cor 12:21-24).

Throughout the entire letter, Paul deals with self-absorbed people who think too highly of themselves. This is one of the significant issues at the Corinth church. However, it is only in verses 15-17 that Paul deals directly with those members who deal with low self-esteem.³¹

Paul concludes this pericope by addressing the superior attitudes of the more prominent Corinthian church members. He reminds them that those members they consider “less honorable” are to be given greater honor.³² Verses 24-25 state, “But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.” Since God has arranged the body, who are we to have dissension? We are all in this together and must take care of one another for the greater health of the body.

This leads into the final verse of the pericope, verse 26, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” This sums up the argument that Paul has set up with the metaphor of the body. Since we are all part of a body, we should rejoice and commiserate with one another because we all share

³¹ Stanley, “The First Letter to the Corinthians,” 947.

³² Barclay, “I Corinthians,” 1128.

these experiences.³³ In the Unitarian Universalist tradition, we often use this last verse during the part of the service known as “Sharing of Joys and Concerns.” Many congregations often say during this time, “Concerns shared are lightened, joys shared are multiplied.”

In this discourse on the members of the Corinthian church as one body and the “body of Christ,” Paul “seeks to instill in Corinthian Christians a sense of their corporate identity—of the unity of all of them in Christ, different though they are individually.”³⁴ This is key, considering the differences between the people in Corinth. The Corinthian church was made up of freed people and slaves, rich and poor, Jews, Greeks, and Romans. Bringing this diverse group together would often imply a need to find common ground and unity in similarity. Paul, however, with the body metaphor, is instructing this church to understand that they are bound together by drinking of the Spirit and choosing to come into the community. Therefore, their differences are essential and add to the community’s richness and corporate identity.

Corporate identity is vital because the Christian faith, or any faith, cannot be expressed alone. One can have a relationship with God, but the individual must be connected to others to live out that faith indeed. J. Paul Stanley states the importance of faith and love:

If “faith” is Paul's code word for right relation to God, then “love” is Paul's code word for right relation to others. Love, the proper caring for one another, is the necessary expression of faith, the proper relating to God, because faith expresses itself in love (Gal 5:6). Caring for other believers, building them up, encouraging them, consoling and even warning them, are not options for believers; they are a requirement of faith. We can see this in 1 Corinthians because some of the

³³ Fitzmyer, *Anchor Yale Bible*, 481.

³⁴ Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 475.

believers there seem to have focused their attention on themselves and God and ignored, neglected, or disregarded others; and Paul simply cannot abide it. In this sense, the whole of 1 Corinthians is a study in love.³⁵

This echoes the teachings of Jesus wherein he states that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. The greatest commandments are summed up in the word “love.” Paul reminds the church at Corinth that all they do within the church and in the community surrounding it should be rooted in a love that cares for everyone.

For the whole of chapter 12, Paul lifts up the idea that the Corinthian church as an embodiment of the body of Christ has such a diversity of gifts (mentioned at the beginning of the chapter) which adds to the diversity of the church. This variety calls the Corinthians “to build a loving community, using the gifts of the Spirit for the sake of and with others.”³⁶ Much like there cannot be a body with all the same parts, it takes all the gifts to make a church body sounder and healthier. Paul reminds the church that the beauty of unity is within its diversity.

Calling the Corinthian church the “body of Christ” gives us two things, “a metaphor for living like Christ and a community or *ekklēsia* representing Christ in their bodies.”³⁷ It is important to note here that *ekklēsia* is being used to reference an assembly or institution. In this *ekklēsia*, “all kinds of people, differentiated in terms of gender, class, and ethnicity, should live up to the spirit of Christ, especially in Christ crucified, which deconstructs the Corinthian cases of disembodiment and reconstructs the

³⁵ Stanley, “The First Letter to the Corinthians,” 786.

³⁶ Kim, *Christ’s Body in Corinth*, 77.

³⁷ Kim, *Christ’s Body in Corinth*, 84.

community of diversity for all (12-14).”³⁸ This assembly requires multiple and diverse people to live like Christ and embody his teachings.

This passage about the body reminds the members of the Corinthian church that they have chosen to be a part of this community where all are made equal, and all have things to contribute to the unity of the community. However, Paul clarifies that drinking of the Spirit and becoming one does not cancel out the diversity that the members bring forward. On the contrary, he is reminding them of the beauty of the church community because of the diversity. Through this letter, and especially this pericope, Paul “extrapolates that barriers of race, culture, and social status are done away in an ‘eschatological abrogation,’ that is, in Christ and in the new age of eschatological salvation they no longer exist.”³⁹ He is defining what the church will look like both now and at the end of time. These artificial barriers will be gone, and in Christ, we will be truly one.

Paul makes clear that the physical presence of Christ is made visible through the church. Jerome Murphy-O’Connor states the church is different from other groups of people. He says about churches as a community:

They are functional communities united only in their carefully governed actions to achieve a common goal. The church, in contrast, is a community of being. Its members do not simply cooperate, but share a common existence. They are related to one another like the limbs of a body. The arm is not the leg. They look different and they have different roles. But they belong to the same body. If one or the other is severed from the body, it is no longer an arm or a leg, although it may look like it for a while.⁴⁰

³⁸ Kim, *Christ’s Body in Corinth*, 84-85.

³⁹ Martin, *The Spirit and the Congregation*, 24.

⁴⁰ Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, “1 and 2 Corinthians,” in *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, ed. James D. G. Gunn, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 81, <https://doi-org.dtl.idm.oclc.org/10.1017/CCOL0521781558>.

The interesting point in Murphy-O'Connor's statement is what happens when someone leaves the body or the church. In Unitarian Universalist congregations, the members of a congregation covenant to be together. When a member leaves the congregation, they still may be Unitarian Universalists, but since they are no longer in that covenanted community, they are not practicing Unitarian Universalists. While one can live out their faith alone, being in a community is a way to “be” as they work out their faith together.

Yung Suk Kim conceives of the church community as:

An “intervening space” or as a “gathering of differences” from the perspective of postmodern imagination. Likewise, we may conceive “in Christ” as referring to a social space for struggling or a time for meaningful existence here and now in the midst of turmoil because Christ's life and death (“in Christ” as a modal relation) deconstructs the power ideologies of some Corinthians and reconstructs the community (*ekklēsia*) for all.⁴¹

In this intervening space, we make room for what Unitarian Universalists call “being messy” as we sort out theology and how we will be with one another. This sense of community is where one can make mistakes, recover, and learn.

Application for Today

The COIC report gives many recommendations to the congregations that make up the UUA. One relates directly to this passage as well as this project. The COIC recommends that congregations:

Promote a more accurate understanding about what congregational polity is, especially its covenantal nature and its relationship with our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of people and their ability to participate in decision making through a values frame.⁴²

⁴¹ Kim, *Christ's Body in Corinth*, 35.

⁴² UUA COIC, *Widening the Circle*, 36.

In other words, we must understand our diversity to appreciate our unity, much as Paul was explaining to the Corinthian church. Without understanding how we work together to weave a tapestry of our differences; we will never be able to thoroughly do the justice work we are called to do in the world.

Kim proposes to read 1 Corinthians:

Through the angle of diversity and differences by refusing to read this letter as a single voice of deliberative rhetoric. Rather, 1 Corinthians can be legitimately understood as a multi-voiced *textus*, woven through Paul's replies to the concerns of the Corinthians (both in written letters and verbal reports to Paul).⁴³

This is vital to remember as we do justice work. We start within our own congregations and churches to listen to the multitude of voices within our community so we can hear the voices outside of it as well. There is a current movement to de-center whiteness in the UUA and hear from more marginalized communities: black, indigenous, people of color, disabled, and people who identify within the LGBTQ+ spectrum. This work has been challenging and often messy. However, it has worked to give greater honor to those who have been perceived as having less honor in the past.

Kim continues about how God calls people to work for diversity in the world:

If we respond to such a call, it is to live as a “body” so that we may share cross-cultural common denominators with each other. Then, we can create more room for true dialogue between cultures within the struggling spaces of our co-dependent human life in diversity. Under the aegis of diversity, irresponsible individualism or relativism should not be condoned. Challenging the traditional vision of Christian life as a lonely journey on the part of one who leaves family and community for a heavenly city (Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*), an ethic of diversity aims at a responsible living together in mutual care. Paul offers a vision of living in diversity, respecting differences, engaging the other with a self-critical awareness, and caring for the other in solidarity and for creation in wonder.⁴⁴

⁴³ Kim, *Christ's Body in Corinth*, 30.

⁴⁴ Kim, *Christ's Body in Corinth*, 102.

This community that Kim speaks about is what Unitarian Universalists aspire to create. The principles that guide us in how we are to be in the world and with one another speak to a world of justice, equity, and peace. To achieve this, the congregations of the UUA need to recognize that they are individual members of the communal body (the UUA) and are connected to one another for mutual benefit.

The COIC report focused on this coming together in their report:

The word *religion* comes from the same base as the word *ligament*, something that binds together. To be religious is to be clear about what you are bound to in the way that a ligament holds muscle to bone. The needed ties in our time involve our ability to see ourselves as truly interdependent.⁴⁵

Since the merger in 1961, which created the Unitarian Universalist Association, the focus has been on individualism and humanism. In this, we have lost a connection to our great diversity with a pluralistic faith. For Unitarian Universalists, the pericope calls us to recognize all the diversity within our faith: rich and poor, post-graduate education and high school drop-out, white- and blue-collar jobs, abled and disabled, race, culture, and even theology. If we are to recognize the interdependence of all existence (the seventh principle), we need to recognize it within our own congregations and the wider UUA.

Conclusion

Paul's teaching to the Corinthians about diversity within unity is needed throughout our world today. More specifically, for the purposes of this project, it is necessary within Unitarian Universalism. As in other denominations, Unitarian Universalist congregations are declining in membership. The UUA has reported a steady

⁴⁵ UUA COIC, *Widening the Circle*, 12.

decline in the number of congregations over the years. While exit interviews have not been officially performed to know why people are leaving, anecdotal evidence points to the same issues Paul speaks on here.

Our world is full of diversity; however, our congregations and churches often are not. Most Unitarian Universalist congregations are white, middle- to upper-class, highly educated, and humanist or non-theist. We are an Association of hands but not eyes, ears but not feet. The work to de-center whiteness and maleness has been slow going and difficult. Micro and macro aggressions against the marginalized continue daily in congregations. Without recognizing the beauty within our diversity and turning that into a true equitable unity, we will never be able to reach people outside our doorways.

This pericope uses the body metaphor to remind the listeners that they are bound together through love and faith to work out how they will live in the world. While it referenced a play they were familiar with, Paul turned the concept on its head to explain unity and equity within the church. Unity and equity come about through recognizing and honoring diversity within the group. It takes all kinds of people, with all sorts of gifts, to come together and create a church that can change the world.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

Unitarian Universalism is a denomination based on congregational polity as outlined by the Cambridge Platform of 1648. This document, created by the Puritans, outlined how congregations were to run their own affairs and how they were to be in covenant with one another. While aspects of the Cambridge Platform have been left behind, the document's core—covenantal relationships—is still the basis for the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). The bylaws of the UUA state clearly that the independence of its congregations is a vital part of the structure of the denomination.

Unfortunately, while the Cambridge Platform lays out the essential parts of who we are as a denomination, there is not a lot of understanding about how it relates or why it is crucial to modern Unitarian Universalists. The Puritans created the Cambridge Platform to separate themselves from the church governance models in England. During this time, many early denominations considered themselves to be Congregationalists. Unitarianism and Universalism grew out of these early denominations and later merged to become the UUA in 1961.

Congregational polity, however, is more than just the idea that individual congregations can call and ordain their own ministers, be responsible for their own property and money, and choose what it means to be a member of their congregation.

Instead, it is centered on the idea of covenant. Just as individuals within a congregation covenant to be in a relationship with each other to create their congregation, individual congregations covenant to be in a relationship with one another and the wider association. And while that idea of covenanting together as congregations can be seen in regional and nationwide events, there is not much more. However, the Cambridge Platform outlined six ways congregations were to be in covenant with one another. This included not only helping one another or coming together in worship and teaching, but also consulting with one another, admonishing one another if necessary, and helping each other financially as needed.

In this chapter, I will explore the history of the Cambridge Platform and the Puritans who created it, how it is used today in modern Unitarian Universalism and the problems that have occurred as we have moved away from the six ideas laid out in the Platform. Unitarian Universalist scholars and the UUA's Commission on Appraisal have pointed out that without a renewed understanding of congregational polity, as defined in the Cambridge Platform, Unitarian Universalism may not survive much longer. As we lose our youth and fail to attract and keep new members, the lack of understanding around the Cambridge Platform is a large part of that.

A New World

The colonists who left Europe and came to Plymouth were separatists: “radical Protestants who refused the Elizabethan compromise of the Church of England, and were

determined to worship apart from the established church.”¹ The Pilgrims, as they became known, first traveled to Holland before coming to North America “seeking to build a Zion in the wilderness, a place where true Christianity might flourish unimpeded by worldly neighbors or oppressive government restrictions.”²

Their neighbors in Massachusetts Bay came out of the Anglican church in England, hoping that the Anglican church could “come to its senses one day.” They believed this could happen if the church “did away with its Episcopal hierarchy, purge its liturgy and practices of all vestiges of Catholic influence, and become pure and wholesome.”³ Many of these Puritans viewed themselves as temporary exiles, hoping to return one day to their home country and assist in purifying the church. They were Calvinists, intolerant to heresy, and only granted political rights to church members. However, the expectation of returning to England meant that they did not spend time on creating an extensive church governance structure or creedal restrictions to membership.⁴

Williston Walker, in 1893, described the Mayflower Compact as such:

The Mayflower Compact is in no sense a creed or a religious covenant; but it is none the less the direct fruit of the teachings of Congregationalism. That system recognized as the constitutive act of a church covenant individually entered into between each member, his brethren, and his God, pledging him to submit himself to all due ordinances and officers and seek the good of all his associates. In like manner, this compact bound its signers to promote the general good and to yield obedience to such laws as the community should frame. The Separatist Pilgrims on the Mayflower constituted a state by individual and mutual covenant, just as

¹ David E. Bumbaugh, *Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History* (Chicago, IL: Meadville Lombard Theological School Press, 2000), 96.

² Bumbaugh, *Unitarian Universalism*, 96.

³ Bumbaugh, *Unitarian Universalism*, 96.

⁴ Bumbaugh, *Unitarian Universalism*, 96-97.

they had learned to constitute a church; and therefore the Mayflower Compact deserves a place among the creeds and covenants of Congregationalism.⁵

However, it did not take long for there to be difficulties from rejecting secular domination. Different men claimed to hear God differently, which became a severe threat. The members of the Massachusetts Bay Colony knew that what God commanded was for all, and there could not be different ecclesiastical orders for the various colonies.⁶

In addition, the mindset of the colonies to wait for a return to England allowed for a slow shifting of faith as the years passed without a return. New generations did not have the same fire the settling generation did. The early congregations gathered themselves around covenants instead of creeds. The covenant was a pledge that the individual would live a good Christian life by following the scriptures. Church membership assumed the person had some religious experience, but there were no tests around that experience.⁷

The Salem Covenant of 1629 was one simple line: “We Covenant with the Lord and with an other; and doe bynd our selves in the presence of God, to walke together in all his waies, according as he is pleased to reveale himself unto us in his Blessed word of truth.”⁸ Williston points out that while it can appear that the early New England churches did not have any doctrinal tests for membership, that is not the case. The reasons the Puritans came to America in the first place were related not to doctrine but to church polity. Therefore, the Puritans dealt first with organizational matters rather than ideology.

⁵ Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), 89.

⁶ B.R. Burg, “The Cambridge Platform: A Reassertion of Ecclesiastical Authority,” *Church History* 43, no.4 (Dec. 1974): 473, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3164923>.

⁷ Bumbaugh, *Unitarian Universalism*, 97.

⁸ Conrad Wright, *Walking Together: Polity and Participation in Unitarian Universalist Churches* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 1989), 7.

It was easily assumed that the doctrinal position was understood by all the Puritans who came to America.⁹

Puritan theology had three significant tenets. The first was that people had to obey God by following Scripture. The second tenet was that we were all born sinners, and only grace saved us. The third was a focus on conversion experiences. These experiences were viewed as signs of receiving that grace and being elected for salvation.¹⁰ For their social vision to be enacted, the Puritans promoted their ideal of congregational polity. Every local church's membership had to contain only those who had been certified as having a conversion experience. By 1635, credible evidence of this experience was required to be listed as a “visible saint” and, therefore, a church member.¹¹ The Puritans rejected hierarchical offices such as bishops, cardinals, or popes because they did not see evidence of these in the book of Acts or any of Paul’s epistles.¹²

While rejecting this hierarchy, Congregationalists stressed the importance of covenants that bound them to one another and assured some continuity of both doctrine and praxis. However, this tension between freedom and covenant has been imprinted upon the DNA of nearly all denominations who trace their history back to these Congregationalist churches in early New England.¹³

⁹ Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 106.

¹⁰ Robert C. Fuller, *Religious Revolutionaries: The Rebels Who Shaped American Religion* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 6-7.

¹¹ Fuller, *Religious Revolutionaries*, 10.

¹² Wright, *Walking Together*, 5.

¹³ Harold Rabinowitz and Greg Tobin, *Religion in America: A Comprehensive Guide to Faith, History, and Tradition* (New York, NY: Sterling Publishing, 2011), 160.

The years leading up to the formation of the Cambridge Platform were filled with disagreements during the second decade of settlement. These disagreements focused on the issues over ecclesiastical polity, church membership, and eligibility for baptism.¹⁴ While the elements of church membership and baptism were profoundly intertwined and vital, this chapter will focus on the issues around ecclesiastical polity.

By the mid-1640s, the English Congregationalists begged the New Englanders to answer the Presbyterians at the Westminster Assembly as the English had no time to do so. The Presbyterians were asking for a detailed and scripture-backed statement of Congregationalism. The churches had their reasons for wanting to draw up such a document. As England's religious diversity expanded, dissenters in New England were causing problems as they grew bolder. In 1643, the Newbury, Massachusetts Congregational ministers began moving in a Presbyterian direction by lowering membership admission standards and allowing the ministers to make decisions alone. The New England Congregationalists rose to the challenge, and in 1646 the Massachusetts General Court called for a synod of the New England churches. The synod at Harvard College took three sessions over three years to complete the Cambridge Platform in 1648.¹⁵ The Cambridge Platform came less than thirty years after the Mayflower Compact and carried the rudimentary ecclesiological principles to a new level of completeness and clarity.¹⁶

¹⁴ Burg, "The Cambridge Platform," 470.

¹⁵ Michael P. Winship, *Hot Protestants: A History of Puritanism in England and America* (United States: Yale University Press, 2008), 175-6.

¹⁶ Jaroslaw Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, *Creeds & Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition, Vol III, Part Five: Statements of Faith in Modern Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 63.

The Cambridge Platform

Before writing the Cambridge Platform, the Congregationalists spent nearly two decades in the New World. During this time, they worked out their polity and codified it in this document while referencing the Scriptures as the basis for said polity. In his introduction to the Reader's Edition of The Cambridge Platform, Peter Hughes states the purpose of the Platform: "Based entirely on Biblical interpretation, the signers of the Cambridge Platform set forth basic principles about how to define membership, choose leaders, come to decisions, handle dissent, and act together despite disagreements."¹⁷ These points were necessary as the Puritan system began to break down in the 1600s due to the Half-Way Covenant, which allowed people to join the church without a conversion experience.

With the completion of the Cambridge Platform, the writers plainly stated what makes a group of people into a church. It is a "visible covenant" or agreement by members to live together in a community, caring for one another regarding their moral duties. "In effect, the basis for the church was founded upon relationships rather than creed, and so the Platform called for a 'voluntary agreement,' or 'consent' among the congregation, placed in plain language, that 'puts us in mind of our moral duty,'" according to authors Andrea Greenwood and Mark W. Harris.¹⁸ The following is what

¹⁷ Peter Hughes, ed., *The Cambridge Platform: Contemporary Reader's Edition* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2008), i.

¹⁸ Andrea Greenwood and Mark W. Harris, *An Introduction to the Unitarian and Universalist Traditions*, Introduction to Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 129, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511843334.008>.

the Cambridge Platform states about the visible church (with Scripture references in parentheses):

Saints by calling must have a political union among themselves, or else they are not yet a particular church (1 Cor 12:27, 1 Tim 3:15), as those similitudes hold forth, which Scripture makes use of to show the nature of particular churches; as a body, a building, or house, hands, eyes, feet and other members (1 Cor 12:15-17), must be united, or else, remaining separate are not a body. Stones, timber, though squared, hewn, and polished, are not a house, until they are compacted and united; so saints or believers in judgement of charity, are not a church unless orderly knit together (Eph 2:19-22).¹⁹

The framers of the Platform were clear; one could not be a church alone. It was only through the coming together in a covenant that the members could form a church community. However, they were not separatists. The Platform clarifies that they were to be in a community with one another. In this section on the visible church, the framers of the Platform cite 1 Cor 12:15-17 to remind the readers of Paul's commentary on the church in Corinth: we must work together with all our gifts, and no one is left out. They placed their understanding of how to be a church in the Scriptures. And the Scriptures are clear: it requires coming together and working together.

There were six ways the Congregationalist churches were in covenant with other Congregationalist churches. These ways were mutual care, consultation, admonition, participation, recommendation, and ministerial relief. Mutual care refers to being in a relationship and caring for the well-being of neighboring congregations. Consultation refers to seeking and giving advice when a church has differences that they could not solve themselves. Admonition is when a church could let another church know of lousy behavior the former sees in the latter. Participation is critical as it shows the

¹⁹ Hughes, *The Cambridge Platform*, 20.

congregations were not to be on their own but to come together from time to time for worship and teaching. Recommendation is sending a member to another church in a new location with a letter of standing from the former church. Finally, ministerial relief involved sharing of financial and other resources to assist churches who could not afford a full-time minister or whose minister needed a break.²⁰

The Cambridge Platform became the standard for religion in the Massachusetts Bay colony until the American Revolution.²¹ At that time, competing theologies began to disrupt the New England churches. It was difficult to impose any kind of theological conformity by rejecting hierarchy.²² At this time, the Unitarians came out of the Congregationalist churches. Rabinowitz and Tobin describe it this way:

By the nineteenth century, Congregationalism had become a pluralistic movement, and it became increasingly difficult to find common ground. The New England churches finally divided over the “Unitarian Controversy” – a fundamental debate over the nature of Christ. Unitarians argued on the basis of Scripture and reason for a radical unity of God. The doctrine of the Trinity, they believed, defied logic and the teaching of Scripture that God is “one.” If God is a unitary being, then Christ could not be both human and divine.²³

In the beginning, the Unitarian movement did not cause a break in the church. But in 1803, an openly Unitarian minister, Henry Ware, was elected to be professor of divinity at Harvard. This was the beginning of the end, and in 1825 the break was made complete when more than 100 congregations came together and formed the American

²⁰ Hughes, *The Cambridge Platform*, 47-50.

²¹ Burg, “The Cambridge Platform,” 470.

²² Rabinowitz and Tobin, *Religion in America*, 160.

²³ Rabinowitz and Tobin, *Religion in America*, 161.

Unitarian Association. However, most Congregationalist churches remained Trinitarian in their theology and did not join the Unitarians.²⁴

In 1846, a report was made on Congregationalism and where it stood amid the Unitarian Controversy and the pluralism inherent in Congregationalism. There was a call to come together and remember the Cambridge Platform:

In order that ministers and churches may re-affirm and maintain to any good purpose the principles and spirit of Congregationalism, it is *important that they should come to a substantial agreement, and should in all material points; adopt the same system of ecclesiastical principles and rules*. Without this, how can they maintain a proper fellowship with one another? If some churches proceed in one way, and some in another, they will not only lose the benefit of co-operation, but will be likely to clash with each other; and instead of affording mutual aid and support, as they ought, they will often occasion embarrassment and trouble to each other.²⁵

In other words, Congregationalist churches needed to remember the Cambridge Platform upon which they all stood. The writers of the *Report on Congregationalism* noted that the principles of the Cambridge Platform “are not at present sufficiently understood and maintained by our churches generally.”²⁶ What was true in 1846 is true in 2024.

Unitarian Universalism and the Cambridge Platform

A long-standing joke among Unitarian Universalists says that the only things we can agree on are congregational polity and Robert's Rules of Order. However, the current understanding of congregational polity is that of complete church autonomy from any

²⁴ Rabinowitz and Tobin, *Religion in America*, 161.

²⁵ *Report on Congregationalism: Including a Manual of Church Discipline: Together with the Cambridge Platform Adopted in 1648 and the Confession of Faith Adopted in 1680* (Boston, MA: Benjamin Perkins and Co., 1846), 12.

²⁶ *Report on Congregationalism*, 10.

outside authority, including the UUA. Much like the Puritans, when the Unitarians and the Universalists merged, they structured themselves around their shared polity, ignoring doctrinal or theological issues. However, unlike the Puritans, the Unitarians and the Universalists did not have a shared and understood doctrine or theology to bind them together. Because of this choice, Unitarian Universalists must reclaim the Cambridge Platform and fully understand the deeper covenantal relationships. Conrad Wright states:

it is not enough to suppose that congregational polity *is* our doctrine of the church, as though that took care of the matter. The assertion that we believe in congregational polity, even though true, has often blocked rather than opened the way to greater understanding.²⁷

In other words, congregational polity has often been used as an excuse for why things are done certain ways in the church as if that answers the question.

Peter Hughes, in explaining how the Cambridge Platform is relevant to Unitarian Universalists, said this:

Derived from British Protestant practice, but differing from it in crucial detail, the Platform established a non-hierarchical congregational polity, meaning that churches would be independent of both outside authority and of each other. The later Congregationalist and Unitarian denominations evolved from the early New England churches governed by the Platform. Universalists were also ordered by Congregational polity. Because of this, when the Unitarians and Universalists consolidated in 1961 to form the Unitarian Universalist Association, they adopted a polity greatly indebted to the Cambridge Platform.²⁸

It is this independence that congregations within the UUA hold sacrosanct, almost to a troubling degree. However, as Conrad Wright points out, this local church's autonomy is not, by itself, an adequate definition of congregationalism. He reminds us:

Congregational polity is acknowledged in the bylaws of the UUA. It is appealed to repeatedly in the time of conflict among us; it is a kind of shibboleth for us. But

²⁷ Wright, *Walking Together*, 5.

²⁸ Hughes, *The Cambridge Platform*, i.

in the process, inadequate and sometimes genuinely distorted versions of that tradition have substituted for an understanding of its real meaning, its richness, and indeed its relevance. How often have we heard it said that congregational polity means “the autonomy of the local church,” as though that were the sum and substance of it, and no more need be said?²⁹

As stated earlier, the Cambridge Platform expected churches to be in a relationship with one another. That expectation has sadly been forgotten over the years, if not outright ignored. The 1997 Commission on Appraisal of the UUA focused on renewing congregational polity. It stated this clearly at the beginning of their report: “This discussion must include the most important but often overlooked element of polity: the responsibility of congregations to be in right relation within themselves, to one another, and to other communities beyond the Association.”³⁰ The report went on to say:

In addition to abandoning the principle of Lordship before Christ, we have also abandoned its earthly form, hierarchy, so that church officers are no longer understood to be models of Christ but delegates of the people. And few congregations maintain deacons. We have also left behind stringent requirements for membership, which in the colonial period meant a rigorous inquiry to ascertain the presence of grace and thus likely election to salvation. We count these changes as improvements. Yet we may not realize that we have also left behind the principle of intercongregational life.³¹

In many Unitarian Universalist congregations, church officers are elected based on who is willing to serve on the Board of Trustees, rather than on who is most qualified to lead the congregation. Congregations that have disagreements within the local church can call upon the Regional staff to assist, but many choose not to until it is too late, and the conflicts have poisoned the whole congregation. Within Florida, where I reside, I

²⁹ Wright, *Walking Together*, 4-5.

³⁰ Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association, *Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity* (Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1997), 4.

³¹ Commission on Appraisal, *Interdependence*, 18.

know of at least three towns where a second congregation in the area came about after a split at the first congregation. Some of these duos are healthy and now have good working relationships, but that is not always the case.

The Commission on Appraisal continued regarding the Cambridge Platform and how congregations are today:

While discarding the doctrine of Lordship, have we also lost a principle of union? Are we in a community of congregations merely to simplify the delivery of services? Does Unitarian Universalism have any meaning larger than what it means to any particular congregation?

If we choose to say that there is a connection among congregations, what would it be? The Cambridge Platform notes six duties that congregations owe to each other: care, consultation, admonition, participation, recommendation, and relief. The Platform also sanctions the calling of synods (or councils), official gatherings of congregations to settle general matters of dispute (such as that which created the Cambridge Platform). None of these exists formally today. Those that exist informally are not uniform or consistent. These intercongregational duties are mainly absent from American Unitarian Universalism.³²

This would seem to be a modern problem for Unitarian Universalists; however, the 1846 report on Congregationalism also showed this to be the case: “There is also a manifest defect in our present ecclesiastical state in *regard to the fellowship of the churches, and the manner in which they are to treat one another when offences occur.*”³³ It would seem issues with the Cambridge Platform's call to care for one another runs deep in the DNA of Congregationalist churches.

Conrad Wright summed up the conflict in this way:

In theory, we acknowledge that our particular churches are part of a larger movement; in practice we are extraordinarily parochial. We organize the U.U.A. and form districts, but then give them inadequate support. We turn to denominational headquarters for assistance in connection with ministerial

³² Commission on Appraisal, *Interdependence*, 18-19.

³³ *Report on Congregationalism*, 17.

settlement, preparation of religious education materials, publication of hymn books, and for various other services; but it is the rare Unitarian Universalist who takes much interest in what happens to any UU church but his or her own.³⁴

Since Wright wrote his book, the UUA has reformed its organization and now has broader regions than the closer-knit districts of the past. Unfortunately, this has made many feel even more disconnected from the wider UUA. It is not uncommon to hear congregation members grumble about “Boston telling us what to do” when a social justice initiative is voted on and to have those same members immediately want help from the UUA for ministerial search or free curriculum for their children and youth.

Unitarian Universalists base their institutional authority on the individual and the free consent of its members to come together and work democratically. Our congregational polity is based on covenant—the shared promises we make and remake together. “Covenants reflect the past, but they are built from the shared needs, values, and principles of the present congregation, embodying the promises the members make to one another in the present.”³⁵ This idea of covenant is embedded within the Cambridge Platform:

This form is the visible covenant, agreement, or consent, whereby they give up themselves unto the Lord, to the observing of the ordinances of Christ together in the same society, which is usually called the “church covenant,” for we see not otherwise how members can have church power over one another mutually. The comparing of each particular church to a city, and to a spouse, seems to conclude not only a form, but that that form is by way of a covenant. The covenant, as it was, that which made the family of Abraham and children of Israel to be a church and people unto God, so it is that which now makes the several societies of Gentile believers to be churches in these days.³⁶

³⁴ Wright, *Walking Together*, 21.

³⁵ Greenwood and Harris, *Unitarian and Universalist Traditions*, 134.

³⁶ Hughes, *The Cambridge Platform*, 20.

However, Conrad Wright points out the two problems with covenants. The first is that because some Unitarian Universalists dislike particular language (usually “God language”), they stop reading if they see a covenant that uses terms they dislike. The second problem is “we do not remind ourselves that a covenant is an agreement made between parties, not a statement by an individual to be discarded or forgotten unilaterally. A church united by a covenant consists of people who have made commitments to one another.”³⁷ Too often, we see these commitments not being taken seriously. As Conrad Wright points out, there are often disagreements over language and liturgical style, leading to hurt feelings, and sometimes people leaving. Sometimes this leads to whole church splits, which leave devastation in the wake and sets up problems down the road. Unitarian Universalists need a comprehensive understanding of covenant and congregational polity to be the beloved community they espouse.

These issues can be drilled down to when people become members of a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Greenwood and Harris point out how membership has changed over the years:

Traditionally, congregational polity has meant that each congregation defines its own standards of membership. There were exacting standards of membership during Puritan times, as each aspiring member was required to prove the experience of the saving grace of God. When the Puritan system began to break down in the 1600s with the Half-Way Covenant, people could choose to join the church without the experiential component, if they agreed to the covenant of the individual church. By the nineteenth century, members were joining a church by making a personal choice to become part of a covenanted community, rather than being examined and approved by church officials to make sure they met an institutional standard.³⁸

³⁷ Wright, *Walking Together*, 9.

³⁸ Greenwood and Harris, *Unitarian and Universalist Traditions*, 131-2.

These days the membership standard varies from congregation to congregation. Some require classes before “signing the book,” and others have the board of trustees approve new members. Others require nothing more than someone saying they would like to join the church. This variance leads to so many differences of understanding around congregational polity and who we are as Unitarian Universalists.

Conclusion

Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal faith. We say these words regularly as congregations gather for worship. As outlined in the Cambridge Platform, we hold congregational polity as our tradition's most important and defining aspect. Yet not many Unitarian Universalists can explain the Cambridge Platform or its importance.

For Unitarian Universalism to survive, it is necessary to return to a complete understanding of the Platform and how it both empowers and connects congregations. As a movement, we are losing congregations each year. We are losing youth who choose not to stay in the tradition they grew up in, even though they still claim they are Unitarian Universalists. Stories abound through collegial circles of congregations using congregational polity as a hammer to force out ministers who do not conform to the wishes of those in power in the congregation. Whisper networks of “clergy killer” congregations ramp up each year during search season. The Cambridge Platform calls for other congregations to admonish those congregations as the UUA does not currently have the authority to do so. It is time to recognize that congregational polity has responsibilities and rights.

A comprehensive understanding of the Cambridge Platform and how it informs our covenants today can make a difference in many congregations. Struggling congregations can reach out to their neighbors without worrying about members' gossip, judgment, or competition. Congregations with disputes can get assistance before a split occurs, which usually results in hurt feelings and loss of people. Utilizing the mandates laid out in the Platform could also lift some of the burdens off overworked regional staff.

This project has been informed by the work of Conrad Wright. Namely his commentary on how Unitarian Universalist congregations can survive:

[I]f a church is to survive, it must not only solve the problem of recruiting new members, but also the problem of holding on to them once they are lured inside. A public identity that will attract newcomers is all very fine; but what draws them in is not necessarily what keeps them there. Furthermore, the recruitment of new members involves recruitment from within, as well as from without. It involves a strategy for holding on to your children as well as for bringing in the stranger from without the gates; and the strategy may be far from identical.³⁹

The other commentary that informs my project from Wright is the question about what members agree to:

Some churches use neither “covenant” nor a “bond of fellowship,” but require subscription to the bylaws, which commonly have a statement of purpose at the beginning. It is functionally the same thing. One wonders how many new members under such circumstances actually read the bylaws and ponder the significance of the statement to which they have subscribed. In any case, there is a commitment to participate in the life of a community of religiously concerned men and women. And so long as the operative wording is “we unite,” and not “we believe,” the essential form of a liberal church is there.⁴⁰

Membership in a Unitarian Universalist congregation should not be taken lightly. It is a commitment and a covenant with the other members to live and worship together in

³⁹ Wright, *Walking Together*, 43.

⁴⁰ Wright, *Walking Together*, 8-9.

a way that constantly brings us back to the table to work things out. It should not be the same thing as joining a social club. However, there are no standard practices for preparing new members to join a Unitarian Universalist congregation. As many people who come to Unitarian Universalist congregations are refugees from other religious traditions or no tradition, there must be a complete understanding of what these covenantal relationships require of members.

Finally, Conrad Wright advised about what we need to move forward as a faith tradition. He said, “the heirs of the liberal tradition will have to re-emphasize the religious community as something requiring both commitment and discipline.”⁴¹ As congregations learn about the whole meaning of congregational polity, we will see healthier congregations come out of it. With healthier congregations, we will have healthier congregational members. With healthier members, we will be able to truly work towards a world of justice, equity, and love.

⁴¹ Wright, *Walking Together*, 165.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal, not a creedal faith tradition. Therefore, covenant is vital to both understand and teach to congregants. There are multiple covenants within Unitarian Universalism, most of them overlapping to create wider and wider circles. First, there is the covenant between an individual and the congregation they join. Then there is the congregation's covenant with other congregations in the geographical region where these congregations are located. And finally, there is the covenant between congregations and the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), which creates the actual Association. In addition to these more prominent institutional covenants, there are covenants within committees and small groups in the local congregation, covenants between ministers and their board of trustees, covenants between staff and the congregation, covenants between ministers within the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, as well as covenants between professional religious educators within the Liberal Religious Educators Association.

While covenant is the foundation of all Unitarian Universalists do, it is not widely understood. Covenant is often explained as “how we agree to be together” and is usually wrapped in behavioral language. Their covenant is part of their bylaws for many

congregations, much like it is for the wider UUA. New members of congregations agree to the covenant when they sign the membership book. This takes place in various ways due to the nature of congregational polity, but many congregations require at least one membership class. The methods of conveying the covenant to potential members vary, and one can wonder if new members genuinely understand what they are accepting.

The 2021 Commission on Appraisal report for the UUA focused on the concept of covenant and what it means to Unitarian Universalists. The commissioners report “that the very existence of Unitarian Universalism may very well depend on how UU members, congregations, and the Association understand, practice, and celebrate our covenant as expressed in the UUA bylaws.”¹ That covenant is in Article II: Principles and Purposes and is currently stated as such:

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love;

¹ Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association, *Unlocking the Power of Covenant* (Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association, June 2021), 3.

- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.²

At the time of this writing, the UUA is in the middle of the multi-year process of examining, rewriting, and studying Article II of the bylaws. At the 2023 General Assembly of the UUA, delegates voted to add some amendments and continue the conversation and study for one more year. The final vote to approve or not will take place at the 2024 General Assembly.

As laid out by the UUA, this covenant is what member congregations agree to when they join the Association. Individual congregations often have different covenants that are aspirational, behavioral or both. For example, University Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Orlando, Florida, where this D.Min. project took place, has a member covenant that begins with the following explanation, "Our membership covenant is a set of shared commitments to participate in and support UUUF. The covenant helps clarify the expectations that bond our congregation and strengthen its value for all of us."³ After that preamble, the covenant lists the following bullet points that members covenant with

² "Bylaws and Rules: as Amended Through February 14, 2022," Unitarian Universalist Association, http://www.uua.org/files/2022-02/uua_bylaws_02142022.pdf.

³ "Purpose, Mission, Covenant," University Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, <http://www.universityuus.org/learn/our-congregation-uuus>.

one another to fulfill: “Participate in UUUF’s communal activities...Help UUUF operate...Care for fellow members and our larger community...Respect one another’s beliefs and differences...Value children as our future...Ensure our church’s financial sustainability.”⁴ Each of these bullet points is explained so that members know what is asked of them. This covenant is also printed and hangs inside the church’s narthex next to the welcome table for visitors.

However, every congregation has a different covenant that they create themselves, and some simply use some variation of published affirmation or covenant from the UUA hymnal. These shorter covenants are often read as a part of the Sunday worship service. For example, the one that UUUF uses in their liturgy is adapted from James Vila Blake and reads as follows: “Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its gift. This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.”⁵

The idea of covenant as a theological concept goes much deeper than these aspirational statements read together on a Sunday morning or posted on a wall. Covenants must be lived into, renewed regularly, and used for accountability within the congregations and the wider UUA. This chapter will explore the what and why of covenant, the biblical principles it comes from, the theo-political nature, and problems that may arise without a clear understanding of covenant.

⁴ “Purpose, Mission, Covenant.”

⁵ Taken from the UUUF service script and slides for Sunday morning worship.

What and Why of Covenant

Unitarian Universalism is a non-creedal faith tradition that relies on a covenant to bind its members together. The UUA Commission on Appraisal, in the report on covenant, made this statement:

We are the promises we make and the vows we break. In this faith, Unitarian Universalism, covenants bind us together and strengthen our relationships. They create a pathway toward inclusiveness and, in times of both joy and sorrow, remind us that we are tough, resilient, and thoughtful. We become better people and often much more intelligent when we make the intentional choice to create connections and stand in a collaborative community with one another.⁶

While covenant is an essential part of the Unitarian Universalist tradition, it is not always widely understood. Most Unitarian Universalist covenants are aspirational, written in broad terms without specific details. Other covenants are statements of mission and purpose, bylaws that explain operations, covenants of right relations or behavioral covenants that define how the members will be with one another and deal with any issues that arise.⁷

With these various covenants used throughout Unitarian Universalism, it is understandable that members may have difficulty truly understanding what they agree to when they become members of a congregation. The primary purpose of a covenant in this tradition is the fact that “we willingly *choose* to love each other and stay in relationship over and over, again and again. In this way, although we may break promises, by leaning into the transformational power of our faith, we can begin again in covenant to love.”⁸

⁶ Commission on Appraisal, *Power of Covenant*, xi.

⁷ Commission on Appraisal, *Power of Covenant*, 12.

⁸ Commission on Appraisal, *Power of Covenant*, xiii.

Marcia Pally, the author of *Commonwealth and Covenant: Economics, Politics, and Theologies of Relationality*, had this to say about covenant:

Covenant, to begin, is a relationship of reciprocal concern, the commitment by each to give for the flourishing of the other, generously, not *quid pro quo*. It is a form of relationship in which each party is distinct and through which each becomes more of the distinct person she is. The gift of commitment—of having one’s needs and concerns taken as consideration-worthy—is how distinct persons flourish whether in childhood or business.⁹

The critical role here is each person’s commitment to helping the other in that covenant. While church members cannot be expected to support others in all ways, taking care of each other’s spiritual needs and supporting through presence and additional assistance is essential.

Covenant is more than just the agreements we make with one another. A contract can cover agreements between people. The difference can be explained as such:

Both *covenants* and *compacts* differ from *contracts* in that the first two are constitutional or public, and the last private in character. As such, covenantal or compactual obligation is broadly reciprocal. Those bound by one or the other are obligated to respond to each other beyond the letter of the law rather than to limit their obligations to the narrowest contractual requirements. Hence, covenants and compacts are inherently designed to be flexible in certain respects as well as firm in others.¹⁰

In addition to this difference between contracts and covenants and compacts, it should be noted that a covenant contains a moral aspect that takes precedent over the legal part of a contract or compact. At its core, “covenant is an agreement in which a higher moral

⁹ Marcia Pally, *Commonwealth and Covenant: Economics, Politics, and Theologies of Relationality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2016), ProQuest Ebook Central, 133.

¹⁰ Daniel J. Elazar, *Covenant and Commonwealth: From Christian Separation through the Protestant Reformation*, The Covenant Tradition in Politics, Volume II (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996), 1-2.

force, traditionally God, is either a direct party to or guarantor of, the particular relationship.”¹¹

As Unitarian Universalists understand and practice, covenant comes directly from their Puritan roots here in the New World. The Puritans made distinctions between the terms law, testament, and covenant:

Often these are combined with one another as, for example, when a covenant is said to lead to the fulfillment of the law or to the receiving of a testament's promise. But they are likewise separable in that each has its distinctive emphasis. A law is a command which depends upon the sovereignty of the law giver and requires subjection whether or not those commanded give their consent. A testament is grounded only on the will of the testator and involves the bequeathing of promised legacies, with no requirement for action on the part of the recipient. A covenant, however, is different from both, for it is a mutual agreement and commitment, in which the consent of each of the participants is essential. This is a central characteristic of covenants between human persons, and when the divine-human covenant is examined, it is found likewise to apply.¹²

Before looking at the idea of covenant within the scriptures, it is essential to remember that covenants can be between equal parties (as is often the case in congregations) or between unequal parties. The covenants with the Divine are an offer that we as humans can say yes or no to and outright ignore. Pally states that “in some sense, this must be the case, for if the superior party gives but seeks nothing in return, we have charity, not covenant. Should the superior only take from the subordinate, we have coercion.”¹³

¹¹ Elazar, *Covenant and Commonwealth*, 2.

¹² John von Rohr, *The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought* (The American Academy of Religion, 1986), 35.

¹³ Pally, *Commonwealth and Covenant*, 156.

Biblical Covenant

In the Hebrew Scriptures, we see covenant and covenant agreements between both God and the people and between groups of people. The Hebrew phrase *karat berit* translates “to cut a covenant” and is seen in many Near Eastern cultures in the form of cutting an animal sacrifice into two and passing between them. Shared meals were another way to mark covenants.¹⁴ Three significant covenants are found in the Hebrew Scriptures: God and Noah in Genesis 9:8-17, God and Abraham in Genesis 17, and the covenant at Mount Sinai in Exodus.¹⁵

One cannot be in covenant with oneself, nor does God covenant with only individual people. While there are stories of God speaking to an individual, such as Abraham, “the context and purpose is always social and corporate, catholic and cosmic (Gen 12:2-3).”¹⁶ However, these covenants must be freely entered into to be true. People who enter into covenants must be not only distinct individuals but also free to choose to enter into the covenant or to walk away. Caring for one another in this covenant is then a gift, not a duty, as it would be should someone not have the freedom to choose to join.¹⁷

The Puritans saw two types of covenants in the Bible. The covenant of works and the covenant of grace. Elazar explains their position this way:

Covenant performed the important function of bridging the Old and New Testaments. Without abandoning the distinction between the two, the covenant theme common to both showed them not only the history of God’s salvation plan, but also the process and continuity of that salvation from Adam onwards. This

¹⁴ Commission on Appraisal, *Power of Covenant*, 28.

¹⁵ Commission on Appraisal, *Power of Covenant*, 27.

¹⁶ Paul S. Fiddes, Brian Haymes, and Richard Kidd, *Baptists and the Communion of Saints: A Theology of Covenanted Disciples* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 103.

¹⁷ Pally, *Commonwealth and Covenant*, 134.

provided a certain sureness and certainty about the steadfastness of God's promise of eternal life for man as well as man's dependence on God for salvation.¹⁸

The covenant of works came out of the covenant with Adam whereby Adam would obey God, and God would grant eternal life and bliss. This covenant of works was legal and relied on the set laws of nature. "The covenant of works was believed to provide a common, objective, moral foundation for all human beings."¹⁹

The covenant of grace comes from the Early Christian Scriptures and the sacrifice of Jesus. Rohr explains how this covenant affected the Puritans:

To speak of the nature of the covenant of grace in Puritan thought is to speak actually of its two natures. Puritan theology was not a rational whole, but was drawn by its own inner impulses in two directions, those generated by the experiential and voluntaristic concerns of Gospel piety and those precipitated by the inherited dogmatic demand for the doctrine of predestination. Evangel and election bequeathed to Puritan theology a double agenda, and the idea of the covenant became, at least in some measure, the point of connection, if not also of reconciliation. So the one covenant has two qualities: it is, on the one hand, the instrument of the mutuality of divine-human commitment and, on the other hand, the instrument of God's sovereign rule in all that pertains to salvation. In the terminology of the Puritans the covenant of grace is both conditional and absolute.²⁰

The covenant of grace is often compared to the relationship between a parent and a child, with unconditional love and support. However, this relationship also contains an aspect of law in how the child will behave. Scott Hahn explains this connection in his book *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises*:

Yet it is precisely *because* of his unconditional love that the father wishes his son to practice the virtues he himself possesses, and thus become like the father and so enjoy deeper communion with him. When this familial model is applied to the theological concepts of grace and law, we see that divine grace—the

¹⁸ Elazar, *Covenant and Commonwealth*, 173-4.

¹⁹ Hak Joon Lee, *Covenant and Communication: A Christian Moral Conversation with Jürgen Habermas* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006), 52-3.

²⁰ Rohr, *The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought*, 53.

unconditional love of the father—is always primary, and the divine law—the virtue required of the son to be in the image of his father—flows naturally and necessarily from that grace. Once these covenant relations and obligations are reexamined in the light of the natural complexity of kinship relations and obligations, there is no need to posit any inherent tension between unconditional grace and the conditions of law, or between unilateral or bilateral covenant relations.²¹

The Cambridge Platform, which provides the polity structure of Unitarian Universalism, was written in 1648 by the Puritans. Within this document, the concept of covenant prevails. However, Elazar points out that covenants are more than just theological:

The covenants of the Bible are the founding covenants of Western civilization. Perforce, they have to do with God. They have their beginnings in the need to establish clear and binding relationships between God and humans and among humans, relationships which must be understood as being political far more than theological in character, designed to establish lines of authority, distributions of power, bodies politic, and systems of law. It is indeed the genius of the idea and its biblical source that seeks to both legitimize political life and to direct it into the right paths; to use theo-political relationships to build a bridge between heaven and earth—and there is nothing more earthly than politics even in its highest form—without letting either swallow up the other.²²

The following section will explore this concept of covenant as a theo-political idea.

Theo-Political Covenant

For the Puritans, the relationship God has with humanity is covenantal. Therefore, this covenantal relationship suggests a similar design for how humans would relate to one another. Elazar explains it this way:

Since covenant entails direct relations between God and individuals—God’s choosing the Elect and their responsive faith—the power of the church and importance of tradition are reduced considerably. Covenant, moreover, is not a

²¹ Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promise* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 335.

²² Elazar, *Covenant and Commonwealth*, 3.

decree; it is an agreement and/or promise involving responses by both parties. Likewise, covenant, not command, is the basis of law.²³

The Puritans did not see the covenant of works and the covenant of grace as opposed. Instead, they saw the two covenants as different aspects of the covenant with God. This led to the Puritans generalizing covenant as a political-institutional concept:

For them, God was the Creator of the universe, and the source of order and morality as well the redeemer. God's power and rule reach every corner of the universe, and every realm of human life. They are not confined to the church. God is involved in every aspect of human activity and in the historical development in achieving God's purpose. Later this idea was developed into a belief that all authorities and all realms of human life are covenantally accountable to God.²⁴

Due to this, the Puritans understood covenant as an agreement that a community of people reached voluntarily through both a common view and a willingness to follow divine law.²⁵

Constitutionalism has grown out of this idea of covenant as "it emphasizes the mutually accepted limitations on the power of all parties to it, a limitation not inherent in nature but involving willed concessions."²⁶ In other words, as people join together through consent to agree on how they will be together, a political order is developed. The Puritans saw the church as a model for social order. The church was not just a community but an intentional and voluntary association. People within the church came and went voluntarily and, when together, had equal participation and committed to one another.²⁷

According to Lee:

²³ Elazar, *Covenant and Commonwealth*, 175-6.

²⁴ Lee, *Covenant and Communication*, 53.

²⁵ Lee, *Covenant and Communication*, 54.

²⁶ Elazar, *Covenant and Commonwealth*, 3.

²⁷ Lee, *Covenant and Communication*, 56.

Covenant has two dimensions: moral (reflection and choice) and religious. If a moral dimension refers to the free, voluntary aspect of covenant in coming to the agreement of the wills between the different parties, a religious dimension refers to a transcendental ground of that moral agreement by inviting the deity as a third, overseeing party of covenant. The religious dimension alerts us that human covenantal agreement is ultimately constrained by a transcendental moral structure.²⁸

However, it is important to note that if covenants are grounded in moral responsibilities, they can also be used for judgment. “A proper covenant not only offers humans the right path or way but provides means for the self-same humans to judge and be judged as to how well they stay on that path or maintain that way.”²⁹ It is crucial to make sure that these judgments are still held within the covenant or that the covenant is used as a weapon to keep people out of the group. Elazar reminds us, “theo-political covenants in the end either make their mark by encouraging certain ‘habits of the heart,’ including certain approaches toward political organization and political life, or they fail.”³⁰ This and other concerns will be explored in the next section.

Issues with Covenant

One of the main things that a covenant accomplishes is marking who is “in” and who is “out” by virtue of who has agreed to the covenant. While this is to be expected, it also has real issues. According to Elazar:

Covenant as a theo-political concept is characterized by a very strong measure of realism. This recognition of the need to limit the exercise of power is one example of this realism. It also recognizes that distinction between those who are bound by the covenant and those who are not. At the same time it makes provisions for appropriate linkages between those so bound and others, granted of a different

²⁸ Lee, *Covenant and Communication*, 54.

²⁹ Elazar, *Covenant and Commonwealth*, 8.

³⁰ Elazar, *Covenant and Commonwealth*, 233.

order, but designed to keep the peace in the world in the face of the realities of conflicting human interests, needs, and demands.³¹

The power inherent within covenants can be mitigated, but it takes a lot of intentional work. Unfortunately, the history of covenantal use has left victims in its wake.

Lee speaks to this and the issues of domination within covenantal theology:

Closely identified with racial, national, and ethical distinctions, covenant was used as a means of domination and oppression toward outsiders and minorities, suppressing diversity and criticism and inculcating a parochial form of social solidarity. It justified the powers and privileges of one covenantal group over others. There are some theological grounds for these mistakes. First, when it was interpreted under a narrow notion of election, the idea of covenant tended to create a caste-like social relationship between “the chosen” and the others (Cf. South Africa under *apartheid*). The idea of covenantal election drew a strict boundary between social groups and set the criterion of membership. Although it may have provided a distinctive sense of identity to a covenantal group, it separated insiders from outsiders. Secondly, often appealing to the inequality given between God and humanity, many Christians used covenant to justify a hierarchical form of social relationships between ruler and people, husband and wife, parents and children, and priest and laity. That is, ruler, husband, parents, and priest justified their dominion by claiming the divine sanction modeling on the inequality of the divine-human relationship.³²

The Commission on Appraisal for the UUA also reports similar issues with the covenant. For example, in their 2021 report, they state:

Any discussion of our religious ancestors’ historical relationship to covenant would be incomplete if we did not acknowledge the weaponization of covenants in our religious past. It is imperative to understand the colonist mindset of our early religious ancestors if we are to fully embrace the power of covenantal theology without perpetrating similar atrocities (and perpetrating the historical ones).³³

³¹ Elazar, *Covenant and Commonwealth*, 3-4.

³² Lee, *Covenant and Communication*, 67-8.

³³ Commission on Appraisal, *Power of Covenant*, 9.

The recognition of the weaponization of covenant is important as Unitarian Universalists are currently grappling with white supremacy culture within its history and currently within congregations. The Commission went on to report:

In some congregations, covenants do not work as they should. This dysfunction might be due to the congregation's failure to address white supremacy culture and the kyriarchy (the many intersecting structures of domination, including ableism, racism, and other oppressions), or because past injustices within the congregation have not been adequately dealt with, or because of other power imbalances. When such issues exist, the covenant may be wielded as a weapon rather than used as a holy document meant to hold the community together.³⁴

Lee states, "a communicative reconstruction of covenant helps to overcome the evils of exclusivism and hierarchy by placing covenant in a consistently democratic framework of freedom, equality, and mutuality."³⁵ Therefore, congregational covenants should be looked at regularly to adapt and change to fit the included people in this covenant. Conrad Wright expounds on this in his book about covenant by stating:

For churches like ours, it is the covenant—not the words of any particular covenant, but the covenant relationship of mutual obligation. But unlike the Westminster Confession, which is an historic document, or the prayer book, which does not get revised very often, the congregational covenant must be renewed continuously. That means inevitably that there is a special intensity in the search for consensus. Congregational polity allows and encourages people of varied perspectives to come together; but it also requires them to find some essential basis for agreement if they are to stay together. There is no assurance that that will happen. Every time a new member joins a Unitarian Universalist church, the perspectives that must be accommodated are at least marginally affected. No wonder refugees from our congregations sometimes prefer churches of other traditions where the search for consensus is less demanding.³⁶

³⁴ Commission on Appraisal, *Power of Covenant*, 47.

³⁵ Lee, *Covenant and Communication*, 68.

³⁶ Conrad Wright, *Walking Together: Polity and Participation in Unitarian Universalist Churches* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 1989), 33.

Unitarian Universalism is considered a living tradition in that revelation is not sealed. One of the ways encountered is in the widening of the circle and the constant renewal of the congregational covenants.

One of the significant issues within Unitarian Universalism, as it is now, is the lack of proper understanding of the covenants that bind members together and what is involved in being a member of the congregation. For many, it is joining a club where most people think as they do on many matters. However, this is dangerous if the denomination wishes to grow. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen states, “the gathering church, however, does not imply any kind of gathering at all, such as the coming together of members of a club. The church gathering is God’s gathering, and it has a definite purpose even when it is not looked upon as something primarily functional.”³⁷ Conrad Wright also speaks on this when he states, “We need to pay more attention to what the commitments are that are undertaken in a covenant relationship and how they may be terminated. Joining a church should not be quite the same thing as joining the National Geographic Society.”³⁸ As stated earlier, new members of a congregation “sign the book” (the membership list) and agree to the church’s covenant. Whether there is a genuine understanding of the covenant and how that affects the individual in relation to the collective is unknown.

According to the Commission on Appraisal, a covenant requires many things:

Covenant requires that we be present to and for one another, that we engage in community, and that we work together for the good of the entire community. The power of covenant keeps us in community together. It seeks to prevent us from

³⁷ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Historical, Global, and Interreligious Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 79.

³⁸ Wright, *Walking Together*, 10.

walking away when that might be the easy thing to do. It requires that we be accountable to ourselves and to each other.³⁹

This is often explained to congregation members as “returning to the table to work things out.” While this is important, it also has the possibility of ignoring or forgiving repeated bad behavior. Members must clearly understand the covenant they agree to live by within the congregation. Congregational leaders must understand how the covenant relates to conduct and how to effectively use it to deal with any issues that naturally crop up with a group of people working together.

Pally gives a clear statement of what covenant is and is not, and this is a statement Unitarian Universalists must understand before they enter into covenants with one another:

From the idea that only distinct persons may freely form relations, it follows that in covenant, no party may be coerced. There can be no faith forced from above, the crowd, or convention. Covenant must be considered, accepted, and maintained by people in a position to refuse. The capacity to say yes—not *pro forma* but in real consent—requires the capacity and conditions to say no. The reverse is also the case: the capacity to say no must coexist with the capacity and conditions to really say yes. Each partner in covenant must be capable of informed consent—of understanding covenant and its implications—and must have the information to be so informed (the terms of covenant clearly explained). Each must also have the emotional wherewithal to sustain relationship; that is, to take the other as consideration-worthy, to give for her well-being, and to accept the gift of consideration (advice, support) in return *without* losing the distinct self that allows one to embrace covenant to begin with. For if one partner loses herself in the covenantal relationship, there is no covenant, as this sort of bond requires at least two.⁴⁰

³⁹ Commission on Appraisal, *Power of Covenant*, 8.

⁴⁰ Pally, *Commonwealth and Covenant*, 134.

The questions congregations need to ask themselves are whether people entering into the congregational covenant genuinely have informed consent, if they can say no, and if the covenant truly supports the people who have agreed to it.

The Commission on Appraisal gave this definition of what Unitarian Universalists aspire for a covenant to be:

A covenant is relational and mutual by definition; it is horizontal, not hierarchical; it is inclusive, not exclusive; it is a web of support that holds all yet is dependent upon all. For some in our faith movement, this covenanting is a manifestation of the process whereby the Sacred and humanity are co-creators of the interdependent web, of the future itself. Others see in the covenant the sanctity of community, an indwelling of the divine within each and in the whole. Others, hearkening to the Christian tradition, experience covenanting and the resulting community as incarnational.⁴¹

While this concept of covenant is aspirational, it is possible. It requires a proper understanding of what covenant means and how congregants must continually renew that covenant.

Conclusion

The theology of covenant is a vital part of the Unitarian Universalist faith. It is tied into the principles Unitarian Universalist congregations covenant to affirm and promote as part of the Unitarian Universalist Association. The question is, however, do the majority of Unitarian Universalists understand what covenant means? The Commission on Appraisal raises this question as well:

Many questions arise when we consider the relationship between mission and covenant. It might be important to first consider why we are together before deciding how we are to be together. That is, does covenant serve mission? What is the mission of the UU congregation and/or the UU faith tradition? Are they the same? Who defines it or them? To what extent are our Principles a mission

⁴¹ Commission on Appraisal, *Power of Covenant*, 45.

statement mixed with elements of covenant, or a covenant mixed with elements of mission? Or are the Principles a statement of shared values? Is our mission in the modern day to explore how to promote the values of justice and wholeness in our lives, our faith communities, and the larger world?⁴²

With these questions the Commission raise, is it any wonder that our congregations and individual Unitarian Universalists struggle to articulate covenant? Due to the nature of congregational polity, individual congregations determine how their membership process is designed. All culminating in the “signing of the book,” where the prospective member states they will abide by the congregation’s covenant. However, as Pally states above, there must be a complete understanding and informed consent for a covenant to be binding. One wonders if that is happening in new member processes.

Covenant is vital to healthy Unitarian Universalist congregations and members, and the understanding of that covenant is the first step to healthy growth. The Doctor of Ministry project covered covenant in one of the six classes. The complete project will be later used to teach new members what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist and how our history and theology—including the theology of covenant—define who we are in this world.

The project is informed by the Commission on Appraisal statement, “a covenant, a promise, can only exist with intention and can only be kept alive with attention. Covenant is essential to what Unitarian Universalism is, and we are inattentive to it at our peril. It is the source of strength, focus, clarity, mission.”⁴³ Unitarian Universalists must focus their mission in their covenants and vice versa. If Unitarian Universalists do not

⁴² Commission on Appraisal, *Power of Covenant*, 15.

⁴³ Commission on Appraisal, *Power of Covenant*, 68.

understand the covenants they agree to, those covenants will fail. When those covenants fail, what holds us together has failed. When the covenant fails, the congregations cannot fulfill their mission. When that fails, the number of Unitarian Universalist congregations will continue to drop.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

Family Systems Theory is a valuable framework for family therapy and leaders of all types. Once the organization's system can be identified, it gives the leader new tools to work within the system. A self-differentiated leader is capable of being a non-anxious presence in the system. In congregations, this is even more important for leaders, whether clergy or lay, as change can bring anxiety into the system. If our congregations are growing as we hope they will, change is the one constant in the congregation's life.

Systems Theory was initially developed in the math and science fields. It was a new way to deal with the sheer amount of information and data discovered. Instead of focusing on the content of the data, it focused on the processes that governed the data. Systems Theory looked at how the data was organized rather than looking at the links between data bits. This method focuses “on the principles of organization that give data meaning.”¹ Clergy members who regularly deal with various bits of information can use Systems Theory to organize and make sense of this information. Edwin H. Friedman points out “that it no longer becomes necessary to ‘know all about something’ to

¹ Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 1985), 15.

comprehend it; the approach also helps establish new criteria for what information is important.”²

Peter L. Steinke, a leadership consultant, and former parish minister, utilizes Systems Theory to advise congregational leaders. At the beginning of his book *Healthy Congregations*, he gives this explanation:

Systems thinking is basically a way of thinking about life as all of a piece. It is a way of thinking about how the whole is arranged, how its parts interact, and how the relationships between the parts produce something new. A systems approach claims that any person or event stands in relationship to something. You cannot isolate anything and understand it. The parts function as they do because of the presence of the other parts. All parts interface and affect each other. Their behaviors are reciprocal to one another, mutually reinforcing. Thus change in one part produces change in another part, even in the whole. There is a “ripple” through the system.³

Change affects the entire system, not just one group or one person. This understanding can help church leaders, and, thus, the church itself.

Ministers trained at Meadville Lombard Theological School, one of two Unitarian Universalist seminaries, receive an overview of Family Systems during their seminary career. This includes reading books by Edwin H. Friedman and Peter L. Steinke. In addition, congregational leaders are encouraged by the Unitarian Universalist Association to read the books by Steinke to learn both Systems Theory and how it relates to congregational life. While this knowledge does not remove all problems that can come up in church life, it does help the leaders manage these problems.

Congregational leaders, both clergy and lay leaders, need a clear understanding of how Systems Theory works and how it can be used to manage change and conflict. As

² Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 15.

³ Peter L. Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006), 3-4.

will be discussed below, Friedman's concept of the identified patient is helpful in times of conflict in the congregation. Often, an incoming minister becomes the identified patient because they are the change-maker in the congregation, disrupting the status quo.

For Unitarian Universalist congregations to grow, as they need to do before they die out, a firm understanding of Family Systems Theory is required to prepare congregations for change. Congregations are currently mostly older, mostly white, and mostly affluent. As younger, diverse, and economically disadvantaged people are invited into the circle, these changes will bring anxiety. Anxiety can be managed with a clear understanding of how the systems work within the congregation.

Family Systems Theory

Murray Bowen was the first to bring General System Theory into use in the helping professions. Called Bowen Theory, it focused more on direct observation of the human family as opposed to direct factual knowledge.⁴ For Bowen, the family was a living system, fluid and flexible. He was more concerned with how individuals in a family responded to one another rather than if they responded to each other. Due to this, the mental and physical “health of each family member may be directly related to the functional state of the family unit.”⁵ The term “nuclear family” was accurate for Bowen:

It stems from the observation that families appear to have an emotional center or nucleus to which family members (and other nonrelated individuals) are responsively attached. From this viewpoint the family can be defined as the total number of individuals attached to an emotional nucleus.⁶

⁴ Daniel V. Papero, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., *Bowen Family Systems Theory* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1990), 4.

⁵ Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 26.

⁶ Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 27.

Bowen was not the only one to work with Systems Theory and families. Edwin H. Friedman was informed by Bowen and added to this work. Friedman took the concepts of Family Systems Theory and applied them to the church and synagogue. It is the two of these professionals, in conversation, that give us a greater depth of Family Systems Theory.

One of the main features of both Bowen Theory and Friedman's Family Systems Theory is how anxiety affects the individual, the family, and the system as a whole. Anxiety is defined as “the arousal of the organism upon perceiving a real or imagined threat.” According to Bowen, the emotional system takes over when aroused, and behavior becomes automatic. Decisions are made to relieve discomfort, even if the long-term results increase discomfort.⁷ This anxiety affects how the family deals with togetherness and individuation:

A surge of anxiety in a family emotional unit reveals pressures both toward togetherness and individuation. Togetherness operates in the name of love, kinship, and loyalty. Individuation speaks of personal responsibility, self-determination, and personal principles. If greater togetherness prevails, the family moves toward increased emotional functioning and less individual autonomy. A by-product is increased chronic anxiety. If the family moves toward greater individuation, anxiety decreases. The balance of togetherness and individuation in a family is important.⁸

Friedman differentiates between acute and chronic anxiety. He says:

Specific (acute) anxieties generally only upset people. Chronic anxiety, on the other hand—the unrealized kind that is deep within the emotional processes of a family, an institution, or a healing practice—not only is more likely to induce a failure of nerve, but it has far more power to “dis-integrate.”⁹

⁷ Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 42.

⁸ Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 44.

⁹ Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York, NY: Church Publishing, Inc., 2007), 102.

Friedman explains that a chronically anxious family develops a sense of “self” that everyone is expected to adapt to. As a result, togetherness becomes the supreme goal of the family. In this type of family, “dissent is discouraged, feelings are more important than ideas, peace will be valued over progress, comfort over novelty, and cloistered values over adventure.”¹⁰

Bowen Family Systems Theory has eight main concepts. These eight concepts are differentiation of self, triangles, nuclear family emotional process, family projection process, multigenerational transmission process, sibling position, emotional cutoff, and emotional process in society.¹¹ Friedman has five basic concepts distinguishing the family model from the individual model. These concepts are identified patient, homeostasis, differentiation of self, extended family field, and emotional triangles.¹² We will first look at the two concepts where they overlap.

Differentiation of self is the core concept in Bowen Theory. It deals with how the individual differs from others regarding their sensitivity to others and their ability to hold their individuation in the face of togetherness. Differentiation is measured by the ability for a person to keep their thinking and emotional systems separate. For individuals, their level of differentiation is believed to be set early in life and is similar to the level of their parents. However, that does not mean the level of differentiation cannot be developed as

¹⁰ Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 67.

¹¹ Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 45.

¹² Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 19.

an individual grows. It takes a disciplined effort and can be achieved by thoughtfully guiding one's personal behavior to well-defined principles.¹³

The basic level of differentiation is solid and impervious to relationship variables. In contrast, the functional level of differentiation refers to shifts within the emotional system. Fluctuation in the anxiety level the person experiences determines the functional level of differentiation. When calm, a person may function with a thoughtful approach to life. In the crucible of an intense personal relationship, however, calm thought and self-direction are eroded and life course comes to conform with the demands of the relationship.¹⁴

Friedman also uses the concept of differentiation to look at the systems in both families and institutions. He describes differentiation as such:

Differentiation is the lifelong process of striving to keep one's being in balance through the reciprocal external and internal processes of self-definition and self-regulation. It is a concept that can sometimes be difficult to focus on objectively, for *differentiation* means the capacity to become oneself out of one's self, with minimum reactivity to the positions or reactivities of others. Differentiation is charting one's own way by means of one's own internal guidance system, rather than perpetually eyeing the "scope" to see where others are at. Differentiation refers more to a process than a goal that can ever be achieved.¹⁵

The second concept of Bowen Theory is that of triangles. A triangle is formed when a two-person relationship becomes unstable due to anxiety. This anxiety leads one member of the relationship to involve a third person, usually by talking to them about the anxiety and the other person. Triangles happen daily, and when things are calm, the triangle is subtle and difficult to spot. However, when anxiety rises, the triangle becomes visible. When the anxiety becomes intolerable, this triangle may spill over into other

¹³ Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 45, 47-8.

¹⁴ Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 48.

¹⁵ Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 183.

interlocking triangles in the system.¹⁶ Edwin Friedman also speaks of triangles in his work:

Emotional triangles are the building blocks of any relationship system. They are its molecules. They follow their own universal laws, totally transcending the social science construction of reality, and they seem to be rooted in the nature of protoplasm itself. Triangles function predictably, irrespective of the gender, class, race, culture, background, or psychological profile of the people involved, and also irrespective of the relational context, family or business, the kind of business, or the nature of severity of the problem.¹⁷

The rest of the concepts from Bowen will be defined here but not gone into great detail as it is differentiation and triangles that are focused on in congregational systems theory. For the nuclear family emotional process, Bowen Theory

suggests that marital partners have similar levels of differentiation and undifferentiation. In the closeness of an intense relationship the emotional selves of each blend or fuse together into a common self, a “we-ness.” Each partner attempts to deal with the intensity of this common self by using mechanisms similar to those he or she used in relationship to the parents.¹⁸

In other words, the bonds of the family move individuals towards togetherness, which can raise anxiety. This anxiety rise then gets dealt with based on how the individual dealt with their parents and the level of differentiation they were taught. The family projection process is how parental problems and anxiety are projected onto the children.¹⁹ Bowen’s multigenerational transmission process shows that this projection process is repeated and operated generation after generation:

Bowen Theory suggests that people marry partners with a level of differentiation similar to their own. Over the generations, therefore, the invested children of each generation marry partners and operate with greater emotional intensity than did

¹⁶ Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 49.

¹⁷ Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 205.

¹⁸ Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 51.

¹⁹ Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 58.

their parents. Their siblings create families with emotional levels that are similar to or less intense than those of the original family. From this perspective in any family there are lines moving through time toward greater and lesser levels of differentiation.²⁰

This leads directly to the concept of sibling position, which is the idea that each individual enters a relationship reliving their sibling position in a family. Therefore, married couples need to have complementary positions in their families of origin to reduce conflict.²¹

Bowen's last two concepts turn towards how the individual relates outside of the family unit. Emotional cutoff, whether psychological or physical, is an attempt by an individual to deal with the emotional attachment to their parents or other individuals with a strong attachment. Emotional processes in society take the processes within the family unit and look at society similarly. These processes reflect the operation of the forces of togetherness and individuation. "As in the family, the critical factor is the intensity of anxiety in society at a given point in time. The greater the level of anxiety, the more intensely the movement toward togetherness erodes individuation."²²

Friedman adds to Bowen's concepts with identified patient, homeostasis, and extended family field. Friedman's concept of the extended family field is similar to Bowen's concept of emotional processes in society. Friedman describes it this way:

The term refers to our family of origin, that is, our original nuclear family (parents and siblings) plus our other relatives (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.). The only members of the extended family that individual theory tends to consider important are one's parents, and their influence tends to be regulated to their impact in the past. In contrast, family theory sees the entire network of the extended family system as important, and the influence of that network is

²⁰ Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 60.

²¹ Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 61.

²² Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 62, 63.

considered to be significant in the here and now as well. In addition, the concept suggests that parents themselves are someone's children, even when they are adults, and that they are still part of their own sibling systems, even after marriage.²³

Friedman states that understanding the family of origin's emotional processes, and changing the responses to them, can help an individual resolve emotional problems in their immediate family (in regard to marriage or parenting) as well as leadership problems in our religious home.²⁴

The concept of the identified patient, according to Friedman, is what happens when there is an unresolved problem within a family system. That unresolved problem becomes isolated to one of the family's members and allows the rest of the family to distance itself by placing the source of the "sickness" to this identified patient. According to Friedman, "by keeping the focus on one of its members, the family, personal or congregational, can deny the very issues that contributed to making one of its members symptomatic, even if it ultimately harms the entire family."²⁵

Family Systems Theory changes the way we think of problems within the family. Instead of thinking of problems as residing within one individual, Family Systems Theory locates all problems as part of the system. This is where Friedman's concept of homeostasis comes into play. This concept is "the tendency of any set of relationships to strive perpetually, in self-corrective ways, to preserve the organizing principles of its

²³ Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 31.

²⁴ Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 31.

²⁵ Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 20-1.

existence.”²⁶ This homeostasis acts similarly to homeostasis in the human body.

Friedman puts it this way:

Family theory assumes that no matter what the various members’ quirks or idiosyncrasies, if the system exists and has a name, it had to have achieved some kind of balance in order to permit the continuity necessary for maintaining its identity. The basic question family theory always asks, therefore, is not do these types of personalities fit, but, rather, what has happened to the fit that was there? Why has the symptom surfaced now?²⁷

He continued with this:

The concept of homeostasis can help explain why a given relationship system, family or congregation, has become troubled. It sheds light on which family member becomes or is likely to become, symptomatic (the *identified patient*). It elucidates the resistance families have to change. It guides in the creation of strategies for change. And it helps develop criteria for distinguishing real change from the recycling of a symptom.²⁸

Murray Bowen used his theory to work mostly with families in therapy. Edwin Friedman used his expanded theory to work not only with families in therapy but also to advise leaders of congregations and synagogues. For Friedman, homeostasis was a concept that helped explain a lot of issues around these different systems:

In work systems, the stabilizing effect of an identified patient and the resistance from the togetherness at all costs help explain why even the most ruthless corporations (no less churches and synagogues) often will tolerate and adapt to trouble-making complainers and downright incompetents, whereas the creative thinker who disturbs the balance of things will be ignored, if not let go. Such homeostatically induced sabotage is a major obstacle to change in any emotional system, family or congregation. Ironically, the same qualities that allow for “familiness” (that is, stability) in the first place, are precisely what hinder change (that is, less stability) when the family system is too fixed.²⁹

²⁶ Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 23.

²⁷ Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 23.

²⁸ Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 24.

²⁹ Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 25.

Family Systems in Congregations

According to Steinke, “congregations are experiencing an increase in belligerent actions.”³⁰ Since Steinke wrote those words in 2006, this has likely increased, especially as the pressure of the global COVID-19 pandemic caused congregations everywhere to pivot to hybrid worship and manage the stress and fear felt by members and clergy alike. Even in 2001, Paul David Lawson reported, “In the last few years, an increasing number of congregations have become unstable, resulting in the separation of their clergy or even, in some extreme cases, the dissolution of the church itself.”³¹ While many issues can cause this, Lawson points out, “viewing this situation from a natural systems perspective, one of the causes for this instability can be traced to uncontrolled anxiety on the part of both clergy and laity.”³²

This chronic anxiety, as stated earlier, causes disruptions in the system. Steinke describes the effect of chronic anxiety in the congregation as such:

It is the chronically anxious individuals in the church family who are apt to conduct a “search and destroy mission.” They will not hesitate to impose their wills on others. They make hostages of their gifts, attendance, and participation. They employ their stewardship as brinkmanship. Their ultimate threat is to run away from home—transferring or terminating their membership if an action is not rescinded, a person is not removed, or a demand is not satisfied. These tactics are effective in church families that place a premium on peace and harmony. They will exchange integrity for tranquility. They cannot free themselves from the bondage of others.³³

³⁰ Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006), 105.

³¹ Paul David Lawson, *Old Wine in New Skins: Centering Prayer and Systems Theory* (New York, NY: Lantern Books, 2001), 15.

³² Lawson, *Old Wine*, 15.

³³ Peter L. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006), 25.

This reactivity to anxiety in the system is automatic. It happens without an individual thinking about it and sadly happens too often in congregations, mainly when upheavals occur.³⁴

Steinke reports when facing high anxiety, many congregations simply freeze. He describes it this way, “since action might trigger opposition, leaders delay and delay. No one wants to upset or offend others. Immobility can put off the inevitable, but only momentarily. As long as the congregation is stuck, it remains knee-deep in anxiety.”³⁵ Ministers see this behavior when congregations continue to do things “the way we have always done” to keep from upsetting anyone, even if that way is no longer working.

Systems Theory teaches us that often the conflict is not about what is being stated as the conflict but instead about the individuals’ places within the system. As stated earlier, individuals learn their place in the system in childhood. Lawson connects the childhood systems with the congregational system:

Relationships are learned at home. Content constantly changes and only takes meaning as part of the process. Since content constantly changes within a relationship system, more lasting changes can come about by working with the relationship systems themselves rather than the ever-changing content. For example, a person who watched one of their parents relate to another through emotional outbursts may continue this pattern when they reached adulthood. They may continue this pattern not only in their family but also at work or in the congregation. In order to work successfully with this person a pastor needs to understand this person's pattern of behavior.³⁶

He expounds on how ministers need to be aware of content versus process:

Often in congregational ministries, the minister gets caught working with content when the issue is process. The content may be the minister’s sermons, the

³⁴ Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 12.

³⁵ Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 13.

³⁶ Lawson, *Old Wine*, 44.

minister's children, church parking, or any one of thousands of content issues. The problem is that, when one of these content issues is solved, another content issue takes its place in a seemingly endless progression. Individual problems may be solved, but the overall anxiety level remains the same because the underlying process that caused the problems was not addressed.³⁷

This is the reason why ministers often say, "The problem is not the problem." In other words, the argument over the typeface on the church bulletin is not what the people are arguing about. Instead, it is about something within the process or the relationships involved in the congregational system. Sadly, in congregations where Systems Theory is not understood, the anxiety level remains the same because no one will address the issues below the conflict. Steinke explains what typically happens in these congregations:

In congregations, boundary violators too often are given a long rope because others refuse to confront the trespassers. When boundaries are inappropriately crossed and people are harmed, no one wants to name the violation. It's as if the disturbance of the group's serenity is a greater offense than the viral-like behavior. Boundary violators go unattended and suffer no consequences.³⁸

Ignoring these boundary violators for the "benefit" of keeping the peace puts the congregation in peril. The chronic anxiety in the system only increases during these times. However, it is often easy for leaders who are not differentiated to fall into the trap of dealing with content rather than process. Steinke describes how this affects the congregational system:

Systems, composed of people interacting and influencing one another, always exhibit emotional processes. When anxiety intensifies, multiplies, and paralyzes, we are dumber. We cannot see options, the big picture, or objective reality. We forfeit that which most defines our humanity. Since transitional times are incredibly random, uncertain, and disorienting, anxiety finds fertile ground. Then, feeling insecure, vulnerable, or at risk, nature provides the automatic reactions of fight, flight, or freeze, all in the service of survival. But, if we cannot get beyond

³⁷ Lawson, *Old Wine*, 43.

³⁸ Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 85.

the emotional processes, calm reflection is not available to us. Uncertain, we tend to replace thought with emotion.³⁹

Leaders can combat these emotional processes. The processes will happen because systems are filled with people living out their childhood systems. Whether clergy or lay, leaders must become differentiated and able to see the processes within their congregational system. Again, from Steinke:

At times of crisis, a congregation functions best when its key leaders are differentiated. The crisis certainly ushers in confusion, despair, and a temporary period of powerlessness and hopelessness. It is a crucial time for the community to slow down and to reflect on what happened.⁴⁰

When a congregation is in a time of crisis, a differentiated leader can calm the situation down by showing patience and reframing the event to bring in a level of calm.⁴¹

However, it is not enough to simply be differentiated when it comes to the congregation. Friedman reminds us that “to the extent leaders are successful in their differentiating efforts in their own family of origin, there is immediate carry-over to their functioning in the organizations (or families) which they lead.”⁴²

Congregational leaders must be aware of the various systems of which they are a part. This is more than just the congregation they serve. According to Friedman:

All clergymen and clergywomen, irrespective of faith, are simultaneously involved in three distinct families whose emotional forces interlock: the families within the congregation, our congregations, and our own. Because the emotional process in all these systems is identical, unresolved issues in any one of them can

³⁹ Peter L. Steinke, *Uproar: Calm Leadership in Anxious Times* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 8.

⁴⁰ Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 71.

⁴¹ Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 71.

⁴² Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*, 20.

produce symptoms in the others, and increased understanding of any one creates more effective functioning in all three.⁴³

One of the issues for congregations is they are, according to Steinke, open to emotional fusion. This happens due to the idealistic nature of churches. However, if the value is placed on harmony and avoiding conflict, people will resist any information that disrupts that peace. They may not be able to challenge one another on bad behavior because no one wants to speak the truth and disturb the harmony in the congregation.⁴⁴ It is up to the leader to stay differentiated. However, if they do not adapt their own level of differentiation to the weakest members in the system, they create and enable the members' dependency. Trying to protect the system from pain shows that the system is weak and fragile. In this state, the system is not open to change.⁴⁵

Friedman believes that a leader can use the concept of emotional triangles to their advantage. While typically negative when happening inside the system, Friedman believes there is a positive side to triangles:

But their positive aspect is that when a leader can begin to think in terms of emotional triangles and map out in his or her mind (or even better, on paper) diagrams of the family or organization, such analysis can help explain alliances and the difficulties being encountered in motivation or learning. This in turn can help the leader get unstuck by changing emotional processes and becoming more objective about what is happening.⁴⁶

To get to this point, leaders must work on their level of differentiation. By doing so, they can be a non-anxious presence within the system. The only thing a leader can

⁴³ Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 1.

⁴⁴ Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 26.

⁴⁵ Steinke, *Uproar*, 62.

⁴⁶ Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*, 206.

control is their response to the anxiety in the system. However, by regulating their anxiety, they can lead the congregation to self-regulating themselves.⁴⁷ That non-anxious presence responds rather than reacts to anxiety in the system. That response shapes the behavior of both the leader and the congregation by modeling. Steinke describes it this way:

The nonanxious presence involves engagement, being there and taking the heat if need be, witnessing the pain, and yet not fighting fire with fire. The nonanxious presence means we are aware of our own anxiety and the anxiety of others, but we will not let either determine our actions. Obviously this means that we have some capacity to tolerate pain both in ourselves and in others.⁴⁸

The ultimate goal of every church leader is to have a healthy congregation. In ministerial circles of the UUA, there is often talk of which congregations are healthy and which are not. These “healthy congregations” are not ones without trouble. They still have conflicts and issues, but they are actively working to address and heal these troubles. They do not let conflict fester. They face those issues and address them.⁴⁹

Steinke states very clearly what a healthy congregation looks like:

Healthy congregations are clear about what is and what is not beneficial to their well-being. Less healthy congregations will allow more fuzziness, indecisiveness, vagueness, and secrets or disguises. Healthy congregations stay healthy because their immune responses are clear and direct. The immune system keeps integrity intact.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Lawson, *Old Wine*, 7.

⁴⁸ Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 37.

⁴⁹ Steinke, *Healthy Congregations*, 13, 29.

⁵⁰ Steinke, *Healthy Congregations*, 33.

Conclusion

Congregational leaders should be taught Family Systems Theory to handle conflict within their congregations better. Not just clergy and other professional religious leaders but lay leaders as well. Unitarian Universalist congregational leaders are taught through the UUA to “view the congregation from the balcony, not the dance floor,” but that is not enough. Leaders can still be a part of emotional triangles while in the balcony if they are not taught to be differentiated. Clergy, especially, need to do the work to be differentiated in their family of origin and their current familial relationships, as that does spill over into the congregational system.

Friedman discusses in his books that highly anxious family systems, congregations included, will shift the blame for the problems to the identified patient. Often in congregations, this is the minister. As a potential change-maker, the minister is coming in to disrupt the system as usual. These changes are often for the better, but an anxious system cannot see this. Friedman states:

The displacement of blame on leaders may be even more salient in churches and synagogues than in the political arena. Over the last ten to fifteen years I have witnessed a tremendous increase in the collective reactivity of religious congregations to their ministers, irrespective of gender or belief.⁵¹

As the apostle Paul says, congregational systems should strive to be the body of Christ. Every person in the system, or body, is essential, and their functioning should be healthy. It is up to both clergy and lay leaders to understand the concepts of Family Systems Theory to help teach the congregation how to be differentiated and handle the

⁵¹ Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*, 80.

anxiety that will always be present in the system. Especially now, during the global pandemic, there is greater chronic anxiety.

Change is necessary for growth. Doing things the “way we've always done them” is not useful for growth. It maintains the anxiety within the system. Lawson speaks on being stuck in the past:

Churches and congregations today are products of the past. The organizational structure is feudal, the church schools and their curricula are based on the Industrial Revolution's training methods for factory workers, and the buildings and worship services are products of nineteenth-century Europe. The church could survive all of this, except that when the church tries to change, it applies the same outmoded viewpoint. The church attempts to change and fix parts and replace individuals. Successful change and leadership will come when the church views the world as it is and makes changes that are more in keeping with modern understandings of reality.⁵²

This change can only happen with leaders who clearly understand Family Systems Theory and how that affects congregations. Leaders need to be differentiated and able to spot the emotional triangles within the congregation. When ministers become the identified patient in the system, they need to be able to step back from the anxiety and help the congregation understand what is happening.

Specifically, in Unitarian Universalist congregations, Family Systems Theory needs to be explained and taught to leaders at all levels, not just the elected board of trustees for a congregation. Committee chairs, outreach leaders, staff, and religious educators also need to know how Family Systems Theory affects the congregation. Unitarian Universalism is a congregationalist denomination. While the UUA can advise and provide resources for learning Family Systems Theory, it is up to the individual

⁵² Lawson, *Old Wine*, 39.

congregations to teach this and use the language of the theory when dealing with conflict. Naming things for what they are helps mitigate the conflict.

Regarding the project, Family Systems Theory was briefly mentioned in the class on covenant and the relationships with each other and other congregations. While an entire class on Family Systems Theory would be ideal, there was not enough time to go too in-depth. However, resources on Family Systems Theory were provided to the participants for follow-up study.

If Unitarian Universalism as a denomination is to survive, congregations must be aware of how to manage conflict constructively. Family Systems Theory is the key to that ability. Too many congregations are currently operating with high chronic anxiety causing bad behavior and running off ministers who cannot or will not deal with the toxic system. The work must be done at a congregational level to support the denomination.

CHAPTER SIX

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Introduction

The four previous chapters informed the final Doctor of Ministry project, a curriculum I developed titled, *What Does it Mean to be a Practicing Unitarian Universalist?* The problem the project addressed is that Unitarian Universalist congregations do not spend adequate time teaching members what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist; therefore, congregants do not understand or know their history and connection to other congregations. As a result, Unitarian Universalist congregations struggle to grow because the members do not have a firm grounding in what it means to be a practicing Unitarian Universalist. If they had this grounding, then they would be more confident living their values and telling people about Unitarian Universalism. One solution to this problem is providing more structured training to Unitarian Universalist members and those coming into Unitarian Universalism for the first time. The scope of this project was an in-person small group class that ran for six weeks and delved into history, theology, covenant, congregational polity, spiritual practices, and Unitarian Universalist principles and sources. The expected results of this project were that the participants would understand what it means to be a practicing Unitarian Universalist and more confidence to tell others about Unitarian Universalism. By having more grounding

in their faith, they would be better equipped to live out their values in the wider world.

By having the confidence to speak to others about their faith, participants will eventually help Unitarian Universalist congregations grow.

Due to the Cambridge Platform and the congregational polity of Unitarian Universalism, practicing Unitarian Universalists must decide on the congregational level to reignite their commitment to their covenants. This work cannot be done from the top down. It is up to individual congregants to decide that they want to be the body of Christ, recognizing the great gifts that each person brings to the congregation. By understanding the true nature of congregational polity, the importance of the theology of covenant, and a clear understanding of Family Systems Theory, these congregations can manage the conflict and anxiety that comes through change and grow into the future that awaits Unitarian Universalism.

Methodology

This project relied on pre- and post-project questionnaires, a guided journal provided to the participants, and in-class discussion questions and follow-up interviews. The pre- and post-project questionnaires used the same questions and were selected to measure if there were any changes in thinking by the participants after participation in the project. These questions were:

1. What does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist?
2. Do you feel comfortable telling others about Unitarian Universalism? If so, what do you say? If not, why not?
3. What are your current beliefs as a Unitarian Universalist?

4. Do you feel your beliefs are welcome in Unitarian Universalism? If so, why?

If not, why not?

5. What is your understanding of our history as a denomination?

In addition to the pre- and post-project questionnaires, participants were given a guided journal that I created with questions for each week. The participants were encouraged to answer their questions each week before the next class, with the last set of questions being answered before the last class. These questions encouraged the participants to journey deeper into their understanding. Not all questions were intended for data collection, as some questions needed to be asked to guide the participants to the deeper data questions. The questions used for data collection will be addressed in a later section.

Throughout the six-week class, participants were asked questions for discussion in class. Some questions asked were to guide the participants to a deeper understanding of themselves and each other and not necessarily for data collection. However, inferences were made in observing the responses. Those questions used for data and the answers will also be addressed later.

Finally, after the class, I invited participants to schedule interviews with me to do a follow-up. Unfortunately, due to current events in Unitarian Universalism that affected the makeup of some of the classes, two of the prepared questions were not asked of the participants. Those questions were “What, in your opinion, does Unitarian Universalism need to do to survive and thrive?” and “Can you share with me the history and current issues around marginalized communities within Unitarian Universalism?” These questions initially were to determine if there was an understanding of the material that

would have been presented in both week one and week five. However, this question was dropped from the final interviews since this could not be discussed in class due to time constraints. The interview questions that were asked were:

1. How did this class help you prepare for membership in this congregation and to be a practicing Unitarian Universalist? What else would you need to make an informed decision on whether or not this tradition and community are for you?
2. If I had no clue about Unitarian Universalism, how would you describe it to me?
3. Is there anything else you want to tell me about your experience in this class?

Implementation

This project was implemented in a six-week class taught on Sunday afternoons from 1-3 pm from February 5 – March 12, 2023. The participants were invited to join the class through announcements, the church newsletter, and individual asks. As potential participants expressed interest in the project, they were given an information packet including an information sheet (names and email addresses for communication about the class) and the informed consent letter. An additional handout for the participants to keep covered the schedule and other details. Participants were asked to commit to all six sessions, especially sessions one and six. There were eleven participants, with the majority making it every week. Some participants did need to miss a class but were upfront with the dates they would need to cut.

I passed out the journals and pre-project questionnaires at the first session. In that class, I gave participants time to answer the questions and turn in the questionnaires. Then, after going over the schedule and explaining the project's purpose, we began creating a class covenant. We agreed that we would provide a space for all to share or pass as they were comfortable, be good stewards of our time, and maintain the confidentiality of shared stories.

The first class was about the history of the Universalists and the Unitarians, and then how the merger happened to create the Unitarian Universalist Association. Typically, in a new member class, this topic is given a brief fifteen-minute overview which is not enough time for people to get a clear foundation of where the denomination has been and where it hopes to go. This class session also included the many places Unitarian Universalism has gotten it wrong regarding racism, oppression, and lack of diversity. As the UUA has focused on anti-racism, anti-oppression, and multiculturalism for the past few years, this class session tied into that and helped ground participants into this work.

I chose when presenting the material to focus on what was known as the controversies around both Universalism and especially in Unitarianism. I chose this route due to my understanding of Systems Theory. Unitarian Universalists respond to change the same way our ancestors decided to respond. The participants acknowledged the ongoing trend of older ministers fighting with younger ministers who developed a new way of thinking and being from their times in seminary. It was evident in our history as Unitarians and still happening today in 2023.

This class was lecture heavy due to the information that needed to be shared. Many in the class took notes as I spoke. The class was engaged with the material the whole time, which was encouraging. Unfortunately, I was unable to use a presentation method to share the information in a visual way. Should I repeat this class, I will provide a visual presentation and a handout. We were also a bit shorter on time for this class as we did the questionnaires at the beginning. In a future class that would not need the project surveys, this class will have more time.

The second class focused on theology. This was a more complicated class due to the word theology. We spent much time discussing whether the word theology can work for someone who is non-theist. We finally arrived at the understanding that theology can mean the study of religious belief, which is what we were hoping to accomplish here. Theology is challenging to discuss in Unitarian Universalist circles because of our pluralistic nature. While on the surface, it would seem that we could have conversations about what we believe without any issue, the previously cited reports from the Commissions on Appraisal point out that we do not live up to that ideal. For many in Unitarian Universalist congregations, discussing any spirituality or nature of God is shunned. This is why one of the questions asked was about participants feeling like their beliefs are welcomed. As will be noted later, the responses showed the divide that exists in the wider Association.

We began with an activity where participants were given four sheets of paper and invited to draw on each their understanding of God as a child, a young person, an adult, and now. After providing time for this activity, the participants shared what they were comfortable sharing about their drawings. The participants helped each other make

connections between their childhood understanding of God and where they are now. We then talked about the historical theologies held in our pre-merger denominations. For example, the Universalists believed God was too loving to damn any soul to hell. However, there was a disagreement between Restorationist Universalists (those who believed a soul might go to a “time-out” of sorts to reflect on bad decisions in life before being restored to God) and Ultra Universalists (those who believed that every soul is joined to God upon death and sin is worked out in this lifetime). For the Unitarians, they had many theologies, such as Arianism (the belief that Jesus was more than human but not equal or co-equal to God), Transcendentalism (the belief that knowledge of God comes to us by direct experience with God), Humanism (the belief that there is no God and science and reason should guide humanity), as well as dabbling by some in Spiritualism (the belief that souls continue on past death and we can have contact with them). In addition to these theologies, we discussed the pluralism of Unitarian Universalism and how various other sacred traditions inform us in our search for truth and meaning. As part of the next activity, participants were asked to name shared values and ideas that are important for Unitarian Universalism today. These were written on post-it notes and placed on an easel for all to see.

In the next activity, the participants received a printout with a suitcase icon on the top half. Participants were encouraged to think about theologies they carried from childhood and “unpack” them. Participants were then handed post-its and encouraged to write their current theologies and worldviews and stick them in their “suitcases.” Post-its reminded participants that Unitarian Universalism is a living tradition, and we are

constantly deconstructing and reconstructing our faith. Participants were encouraged to occasionally return to their “suitcases” to determine what may have changed.

In week three, we discussed spiritual practices, both individual and communal. Often, this is one of the “babies” thrown out with the bathwater when people “come in” to Unitarian Universalism from traditions that have harmed them. It is important to find and experiment with practices that bring them closer to God, Source, the Universe, the Great Mystery, or to calm and center themselves. We discussed the need for a well to draw from when working for a better future and a just world. The next section of this week’s lesson discussed what activities become spiritual practices and why.

After that, there was a lively discussion on what spiritual practices the participants had tried, liked, and did not like. I then led them through a group *Lectio Divina* practice using a piece of poetry. Once participants had a few moments to journal how that practice went for them, I led them in a guided meditation for relaxation. We then talked about how those two practices went for each of them. Finally, participants were encouraged to try a new spiritual practice (or revive an older one) and journal their experiences during the week.

In week four, we discussed the Cambridge Platform, the language of covenant, and congregational polity. For many Unitarian Universalists, there is a lot of misunderstanding on what congregational polity means. Often, congregational polity is understood in light of the rights given to congregations: to call their own ministers, own their own buildings, and conduct their own business without interference by the UUA. However, congregational polity also means there are responsibilities to support and admonish other congregations as needed. This session gave the history of congregational

polity in the Cambridge Platform and how congregations must be in covenant with one another and the Association. The participants and I had a lively discussion about how the regional setup of the UUA has made it more difficult for local congregations to gather (as opposed to the older district model). Many were surprised to discover that the congregation was not just covenanted with the UUA but also in covenantal relationship with other congregations and should be working together and helping one another as needed.

The fifth session focused on the Principles and Sources that Unitarian Universalists covenant to affirm and promote. Most Unitarian Universalists can state the first and seventh Principles but often struggle with the others. It is similar to the Sources in that congregations tend to pick and choose which sources they use and ignore. A complete understanding of the breadth and depth of these sources is necessary as it leads to better theological diversity. As I began the research process for this project, the UUA considered adding an eighth principle and had a study commission working on restructuring the entirety of Article II of the bylaws (where the principles and sources reside). The study commission report was released about a month before the start of the project. This changed the makeup of this class as I had to touch on both events. This led to a lively discussion about how the changes are being received (for a few participants, this was their first time hearing the report), what the next steps are to acceptance of the changes, and how other Unitarian Universalists are responding to the changes. The participants brought up the first session and the reports of how conflicts were handled in our early days. Due to this deeper conversation that bubbled up, we did not have time to delve more into the 8th Principle and why it was being potentially added. However, after

discussing personal and shared theologies, this session was much more profound than conversations with non-participants of the Article II changes. While not a data point that was collected, the observation was fascinating.

In the last session, I had originally planned to discuss the meaning of membership in the congregation in which the project was held. However, this wasn't necessary since most participants had been members at UUUF for years. So instead, we discussed what it means to have informed consent when joining a congregation, having a deeper understanding of what it means to be a practicing Unitarian Universalist, and where the participants wanted to go next as the project concluded. In addition, we discussed how everything we learned and discussed tied into being a member of a congregation and the larger UUA. In the last class, I also gave time for participants to complete their post-project questionnaires and collect their journals. Finally, we had a bit of an impromptu party to celebrate the close of the project.

Participants discussed creating a lay-led service for a future date where they could share their "I believe" statements and answer the question, "What does it mean to be a practicing Unitarian Universalist?" This service will likely take place later in the year. The participants were enthused about sharing their learnings with other congregants. They also supported ideas and adjustments that could be made to the program before sharing it in another class setting or published form.

Once the class was complete, I sent out a poll to participants asking them to schedule a time for a one-on-one interview with me. About half of the participants could do so, and those interviews took place between April 2 and April 12, 2023. The interviewees each joined me on Zoom, and those interviews were recorded. During those

calls, many participants shared their favorite memories from the project and told me how much they appreciated being a part of it. The data was then collated in a spreadsheet stored on a USB stick and filed in a locked file cabinet along with the videos from the class sessions and Zoom interviews. In addition, paper copies of the questionnaires were filed along with the informed consent letters and information sheets. Finally, the journals were returned to the participants, along with a resource list for them to continue studying.

Summary of Learning

Going into this project, the problem I stated was that Unitarian Universalist congregations do not spend adequate time in new member classes, and therefore congregants do not know their history or connections to other congregations. I hypothesize that if Unitarian Universalists had a firm grounding in what it means to be a practicing Unitarian Universalist, they would be more confident in living those values and telling others about their faith. As mentioned above, I asked more questions than needed for data collection to help guide the participants through their learning. With the questions before, during, and after the project, I saw growth in the participants' understanding of Unitarian Universalism. I will now provide a summary of the data from the questionnaires, journals, discussion questions, and, finally, interviews.

Questionnaires

The primary question asked in the questionnaire was, "What does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist?" The responses at the start of the project were similar to what I have heard through the years in various congregations. In the responses, the word

“justice” was used three times, the word “covenant” was used two times, and there were three different references to individual beliefs. Many participants mentioned phrases and buzzwords from UUA and from the congregation’s website. For example, Participant E repeated the phrase said by many in the congregation, “We are a faith not bound by creed, but by covenant.” Participant M responded, “I don’t know. Guessing the 7 principles.”

According to the various Commission on Appraisal reports, many of these responses are similar to statements heard throughout congregations. Unitarian Universalism is often viewed through orthopraxy (right acting) instead of orthodoxy (right thinking). The tradition is steeped in social action as well as pursuing one’s spiritual truth while acknowledging the journey that others are on as well.

Looking at the responses in the post-project questionnaire, the answers to this question show a shift into a deeper understanding of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. There is also a new expression of how their faith impacts those around them. As shown in the detailed answers in Appendix A, many participants were able to respond with longer answers. In this set of responses, “community” is mentioned three times explicitly and “justice” is mentioned five times. For the point of comparison, Participant E’s response was, “The willingness to accept others’ point of view, the following of the seven principles, the idea that our faith grows and changes.” Participant M’s post-project response was, “There are diverse beliefs with shared values. The 7 principles immediately come to me. Now I add the 6 sources.”

The second question on the questionnaire was, “Do you feel comfortable telling others about Unitarian Universalism? If so, what do you say? If not, why not?” This

question is directly tied to my hypothesis that if Unitarian Universalists are grounded in what it means to be a UU, they can more easily share their faith. Most participants felt comfortable telling other people about Unitarian Universalism, but as the results show, there is no consistent answer to the second half of the question. However, there are constant threads throughout. For example, participants could list that Unitarian Universalism is a non-creedal denomination, that one's spiritual journey is their own, and that it is a living tradition. These responses help support the hypothesis that Unitarian Universalists struggle with explaining what Unitarian Universalism is to others.

In the post-project questionnaire, this question showed a change in the participants' comfort level in explaining their faith. For many, this came about as the class gave them language to use when describing what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. The number of people who responded yes to the initial question stayed the same. Ten out of eleven responded affirmatively; however, the responses on what they said was now deeper with more understanding. For example, Participant T answered the pre-project questionnaire with, "Yes. However, I am inclined to emphasize the universalist aspect as a unitarian vs. trinitarian concepts/arguments are not important to me from a theological perspective." In the post-project questionnaire, this same participant answered:

I do. I'm proud of its activist history, especially as it relates to social justice, and am happy to discuss this with others. Because of my religious education when I was a Catholic, I am also comfortable discussing more theological issues, but this usually becomes combative because others feel the need to "save" me so I tend to avoid those conversations.

The third question, "What are your current beliefs as a Unitarian Universalist?" delved into each participant's current beliefs. I asked this question to gauge whether

participants could articulate their faith better after going through the project. There is a wide range of beliefs in Unitarian Universalism. For many, the Principles of Unitarian Universalism are often the guiding light for their views. Community and the journey of each person's spiritual path were also essential aspects of participants' beliefs.

In the post-project questionnaire, many participants had a more profound shift in their answers after the class was complete. While some still use the Principles as a language source, many of these responses show they picked up the language from the project. They used this language to give thoughtful and expressive answers. Participant V answered the pre-project questionnaire in this way, "I embrace the principles. I believe in community as a lifeboat, and I believe that we have to love people who see things differently from me." At the end of the project, this participant answered, "I don't want to be a helpful, caring human to impress a God that will grant me a reward. I want to live a life of service because working with others to 'lift all boats' is the most fulfilling expression of love I have ever known."

The fourth question brought about some interesting data. The question was, "Do you feel your beliefs are welcome in Unitarian Universalism? If so, why? If not, why not?" Out of eleven participants, nine answered with a resounding yes because the dominant culture often shares their beliefs in the congregation. One participant said their beliefs are welcome in some groups but not others. One participant said, "There doesn't seem to be any patience for God talk."

The number of participants answering yes in the post-project questionnaire was the same. However, there was a shift in who responded yes or no. An interesting comment from a participant who answered in the affirmative on the pre-project

questionnaire had this to say in the post-project questionnaire, “I do feel my beliefs are welcome, but I have struggled and been disappointed at the number of hurt, wounded ‘expats’ from Christian upbringings who belittle any exploration of God or the teachings of Jesus.”

The final question was to check the participants’ knowledge of Unitarian Universalist history. This question was asked to determine if the participants increased their knowledge through this project. The answers to the question, “What is your understanding of our history as a denomination?” primarily referred to the two separate denominations pre-merger and how we moved from a liberal Christian faith to a pluralistic faith tradition. Many participants could give more detailed answers in the post-project questionnaire than in the pre-project questionnaire. After the project, participants could name the threads that run through history to today in a systems-thinking way.

Learnings from Sessions

The first session covered the history of the Universalists and the Unitarians before the merger and how the Unitarian Universalists navigated the merger. The questions in the participants’ journals for this session were mainly to help the participants engage in the material. However, the third question from the journal for this week, “What does our history tell you about Unitarian Universalism today?” gave interesting results. Many participants lifted our Universalist and Unitarian ancestors’ struggle with change and how that is still prevalent today. As mentioned earlier, the UUA is going through a significant rewriting of Article II of the bylaws. This change has caused a lot of controversy and is part of the context in which this project took place. The takeaway from the participants

during this session is that our present is affected by our ancestors' past behaviors.

Participant R answered, "That UUs seem to typically be people that didn't fit in other places. That can mean that we don't fit in perfectly here either. Or there is some personal reason we don't "fit in." Participant M stated, "It's rich and complicated. The UUA is still dealing with the same issues." Participant E answered, "At critical times change was met with resistance even in progressive faith. It feels we may have reached a similar time and we see resistance." Participant L answered:

Good demonstration of how revelation is continuous. Unitarians have embraced new perspectives, i.e., Transcendentalism, humanism, intellectual curiosity – head. Universalists – more inclusive love – "god." Still struggling with paradox of heart and head today. I am proud to be UU – I can think for myself about God, spirituality, etc., and love all and work to change the world – and we can make mistakes.

The second session began with the activity mentioned in the previous section. The participants enjoyed the drawing activity and the opportunity to share with the others. As sharing religious backgrounds can be vulnerable, I was pleased that we had formed a group covenant that was strong enough to hold these vulnerabilities. Participants shared how they viewed God as children, young adults, adults, and now. Their responses were thoughtful and profound, and the sharing helped others dig deeper.

The most significant takeaway from this activity was that most people had been taught about a God who sees everything and judges everything they do. Many felt they could never meet the expectations placed on them as children in church. Most felt they developed a relationship or understanding with something greater than themselves, although not all participants called that thing "God." That week, the participants answered the question, "How would you define your personal theology?" in their

journals. The responses were deep and thoughtful, and I attribute that to the activity and debriefing during the class. One of the interesting observations is that many participants used what is often called “God talk” in Unitarian Universalism circles. I believe that due to the vulnerability and sharing in the session, the participants were able to continue that as they answered the question during the week.

The third session focused on spiritual practices. We discussed various spiritual practices in class and experimented with two while in class. When asked which spiritual practices they’ve tried, nearly all known ones were mentioned: journaling, yoga, meditation, prayer, singing, walking, study, etc. All eleven participants said in their journals that the spiritual practices they tried had not become habits they’ve continued. No one type of practice has “stuck,” and they often try different spiritual practices as needed in day-to-day life. One takeaway for me, as someone with multiple neurodivergencies, is how universal this was. It has led me to explore if there is a way to teach the importance of and the practice of spiritual practices specifically for Unitarian Universalists. I want to explore where the roadblocks are for Unitarian Universalists in this realm. When participants were asked in class to describe the spiritual practices they are still participating in, most happened in community: Sunday services, choir, this class, and watching content made by others for affirmations.

The fourth session dealt with the history of the Cambridge Platform and how that informs Unitarian Universalism today as a congregationalist and covenantal faith tradition. We discussed what covenants are and are not, how they can be repaired, and what happens if they cannot be repaired. We also discussed the connections between ourselves as members, our congregations in a state, region, and nationally, and how those

connections create the Unitarian Universalist Association. It was interesting to hear from the participants who remembered the time before the districts were changed into regions. They lamented the loss of district and cluster events which helped foster the closeness our covenants call for.

In the group discussion during class, I asked the question, “How does our covenant and congregational polity work together in our relationships here and in the wider Unitarian Universalist community?” One participant responded, “Congregational polity is about covenant. Common knowledge is that these are two separate things – but it’s not. We can’t do what we want because that’s not what it’s about.” This summed up the session well, and the rest of the participants agreed.

The participants answered the prompt in their journals, “Describe your understanding of covenant.” Many used words such as boundaries, created, community, shared, promises, agreements, and mutual. In addition, the answers to the question, “How do we repair covenant?” also shared answers. The participants said something like using active listening, having conversations, bringing in help when needed, and finding a way to resolve the problem in love.

The fifth session was one of the most lively out of all six sessions. The topic was the Principles and Sources of Unitarian Universalism. As mentioned, the UUA is amid conversations around the proposed changes to Article II, where the Principles and Sources are stated in the bylaws. After a quick history lesson about how the current Principles came to be, we discussed the Eighth Principle Project and the report from the study commission on Article II. An interesting observation was made that was not part of the original expected data. The conversation with the participants about Article II went

much deeper and more theological than conversations with other congregants that were not participating. The participants were also able to connect this current contentious discussion (in the wider UUA) to the many points in our history when controversies around new ways of thinking and being came up. The participants agreed that we have been through these things before and will likely go through them again and that we need to focus on our covenants and shared values to get to the other side. They also committed to conversing with people about their reactions to the proposed changes.

In the class discussion, I asked, “Do you think it’s important to look at our Principles and Sources every ten years?” One participant answered, “As we bend the arc towards justice, we uncover more injustice. The dominant narrative shifts and changes.” Another reflected, “We learn things we may not have realized were offensive. As we learn and grow, we need to take a look again.” Another participant commented on that statement and related about watching old comedy specials or movies and realizing they no longer hold up. I also asked, “How does the Eighth Principle identify who we are as Unitarian Universalists?” Again, the language of this principle had active language around anti-racism work. A participant replied, “I feel like adding it is the difference between striving to be actively anti-racist and just saying that racism is bad. The active part of dismantling racism is different than just thinking about it.” Another participant replied, “I agree. We hold MLK up as a modern-day prophet. But to really honor him, we have to do the work. In his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, MLK was disappointed in us. We’re more devoted to the absence of tension rather than the presence of justice.” Another said, “It says we hear you, and we’re going to do something about it.”

The fourth question in the journal for this week also asked about inclusivity. The question was, “Are our principles and sources inclusive? If so, how? If not, why not?”

The responses were interesting as some participants had not previously wrestled with that question. Participant E noted, “No, I think it’s been shown that certain people still feel excluded and not welcomed. If POCs still feel there are issues, we should honor that.”

Participant Y stated, “Honestly, our principles are easier said than done. They are much easier for those who live with privilege. It is hard to be bothered with principle of any kind if you’re about to be evicted and can’t afford groceries.” Finally, Participant L put their thought process in writing:

I just re-read the Principles and Sources and my initial thought is: yes, they’re inclusive. However, I’m not missing! Who is? What is? Men and women changed to people – good! Should “Every person” change to all beings? Everything? Should we add Islam? Abrahamic faiths? Where is atheism? Open to conversation!

I am thankful that the participants were able to be vulnerable as they thought through their privilege in being part of the dominant Unitarian Universalist culture and how others may not have that same position. The fact that the participants were wrestling with this question shows that the previous sessions provided some excellent grounding in what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist.

As mentioned above, session six changed as the class progressed. Instead of having a repeat of the current new member class that explains how the congregation itself functions, we discussed how the information from the previous sessions helped inform what it meant to be a member of a Unitarian Universalist congregation. I asked the participants, “After participating in this project, do you feel you have enough information to make an informed choice about membership in this congregation?” All eleven

participants responded positively to the question. One participant said, “The design of the class, the conversation level that happens, is well thought out because if I had a problem, I would not have come to the last class to join. It is easy to determine if this is where you belong.” Another participant added, “I’m wary of churches that have new member classes but not member classes.” This was followed by participants agreeing that this class should be taught to all members, not just new ones.

I then asked the participants, “Do you feel you have a grounding in what it means to be a practicing Unitarian Universalist after this program? Why or why not?” One participant spoke out immediately, saying:

Yes, even more so than I did before. Anytime I learn something more about our history, and where we come from, I realize it all fits together with who I am and making the world a better place. Social action is important to me. I’m more likely to say, ‘As a UU, I believe this way about this.’ We don’t do well about believing we are a faith tradition. This helps me grow more and be more confident about sharing what my worldview is.

Another participant followed with:

I feel like this was really good to think about what I believe in. I realized in this class, I hadn’t checked in with myself to see what’s new, what’s changed. Being able to think through this with all the diversity in UU. What do I believe? Why do I believe that?

The other participants agreed with these two statements. Participant Q, in answering the journal question, “What impact, if any, do you feel this program will have on your life going forward?” said, “I need to take the time to learn and understand proposed changes and why they are uncomfortable for some. I need to support programs that will make more people of different backgrounds feel welcome and included here at UUUF.”

Participant T answered, “There were certainly aspects of the class that were enlightening

and will help me moving forward, especially when it comes to discussing UUism.”

Participant V said:

I think my commitment to Unitarian Universalism feels stronger. I know a few people shared that they felt "saddened" or a "bit depressed" to learn some of the history of UUs. I don't share that sentiment. I actually feel the opposite. I feel like I love humanity more when I see the failures and the efforts to rectify them. I experience connection with others when we all acknowledge short comings in ourselves and our faith community. This program gave me a perspective that made me feel hopeful.

With these responses, I can state that my hypothesis has been proven. Providing a structured program to deeply engage what it means to be a practicing Unitarian Universalist gives participants a grounding that helps them understand their faith better. When they know their faith better, they are more comfortable sharing it. The post-project questionnaires and interviews helped prove that further.

Once the project was complete, I scheduled interviews with participants. As stated before, I asked three questions. It was in these interviews, a few weeks after the class was over, that gave the most evidence to prove my hypothesis. For example, participant V, when asked, “How did this class help prepare you for membership into this congregation?” said:

I had a lack of confidence when I became a UU. I didn't feel like I knew what I was supposed to know, and I felt a little bit like I had some imposter syndrome, and this provided a format to potential new members or new members I think would be extremely valuable...I think it's really worthwhile for everybody. But if you started with this, you would have so much more comfort and have a lot more resources to learn more. I mean it. I really think this is what we need. So people really do understand the history and the tradition. I get really uncomfortable sometimes when I've actually heard people who have been in a UU church for a while say, well, we're not really like organized religion. I find that offensive.

Participant G said, “I think it would be wonderful.” They described their new member class experience: “when you're fresh into something, you don't know what to pay

attention to.” Participant M answered, “I still would have joined, but I would have gotten a broader, clearer picture.” Participant E had similar affirmative answers and added that the small group nature of the class would give a new member a group of people they could grow close to in the process. The other three participants interviewed also answered in the affirmative about this class being helpful and thoroughly preparing a new congregation member. A few weeks later, one participant officially re-joined the congregation and stated they did that because of this class.

In answer to the second question, most participants I interviewed repeated what they answered in their questionnaire, although I noticed many had tightened their responses. This tells me they had continued crafting how to tell people about Unitarian Universalism. They also reported being comfortable with their explanations, which showed growth in that area. Most participants did not have much else to share in response to the third question, which was an open-ended opportunity for them to share anything else.

Conclusion

I am confident that my hypothesis has been proven through the data gathered in the pre- and post-questionnaires, journal entries, discussion questions, and interviews. The participants showed an increased grounding in their Unitarian Universalist faith, a stronger ability to share what that faith means to them, and an understanding of how our history shapes who we are today. In the weeks after the project ended, I observed more willingness by the participants to talk about their beliefs and our history, especially in light of the previously mentioned Article II discussion. This proves that the project helps

give participants a more robust grounding. As mentioned before, one participant who had let their membership lapse years ago renewed their membership as a direct result of this project. The participant sought me out to inform me of that decision a month after the project ended.

With some slight changes to the curriculum setup, this project can be used repeatedly as a starting point for people wishing to deepen their understanding of Unitarian Universalism. Not just for new members or new seekers, but as evidenced by the participants, it is beneficial for any Unitarian Universalist. I plan to edit and publish this curriculum as a workbook for individual seekers to help prepare them for entering a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Membership committees and congregations can also use it to guide new and existing members into a more profound commitment to Unitarian Universalism.

Watching eleven individuals who knew of each other become close and share deeply with one another over six weeks was an unintentional but delightful outcome. Many participants commented that if they were new to the congregation, a class like this would help them immediately feel connected to others in the community. I also observed participants in the weeks after the project was completed be more open to sharing what they believed and learned with others.

One of the biggest hurdles that participants expressed in feedback was the pacing of the classes. Six weeks of two-hour classes is a lot to ask of congregants, even more so if they are new. While the D.Min. project was time-sensitive, future iterations of this curriculum will be done every other week or even more spaced out to give time for participants to reflect on what they learned the week prior. In addition to spreading out

the classes, I would provide homework for the participants. This homework would give some foundational knowledge so more time could be spent discussing and taking concepts further. This was not possible with only a week between classes.

Another thing I would have done differently is to provide a visual presentation and various handouts. Especially with the first class that covered so much history, handouts and a visual presentation would have been helpful for the participants to follow along easier. Unfortunately, while that was in my original plan and timeline, I could not follow through with that in time for the project.

For future work, I believe there is more to consider regarding helping congregants understand what it means to be a practicing Unitarian Universalist. A training program for membership committees would be another way to investigate this concept. If, rather than working with one congregation's members at a time, would it be more productive to teach and train the leadership and membership teams from a region and have them go back and lead their congregations? There are various ways this could be accomplished through regional channels.

I also think working with this concept of creating Unitarian Universalist disciples would help with other issues raised by the Commissions on Appraisal. If Unitarian Universalists truly understand what it means to live their faith, then the conflicts between non-theist and theist, young and old, rich and poor, will not matter as much. This, too, can help congregations grow when these tensions are relieved.

I believe this project is the first step in what can be possible for the future of Unitarian Universalism. If people are more grounded in their faith, they will want to tell people, which will help Unitarian Universalism grow. It will also help them be more

committed congregants with one another and help each other grow in their spiritual journeys.

APPENDIX A

PRE- AND POST-PROJECT QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES

Responses to Pre-Project Questionnaire Question 1: “What does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist?”

Participant	Answer
A	To center life on love. To assume good intentions. To speak out against oppression. To support everyone’s search for joy.
B	It means, briefly, that I’m identifying myself as a liberal thinker and a supporter of justice and democracy for all.
E	We are a faith not bound by creed, but by covenant.
G	Social justice, fellowship, respect for thoughts and opinions of others.
L	To be part of a faith community that embraces the pluralistic nature of beliefs and perspectives and promotes the inherent worth and dignity of all - Love in Action.
M	I don’t know. Guessing the 7 principles.
Q	It means learning to live according to my values and having an open mind. It means willingness to learn and to change.
R	To be open with others’ opinions.
T	To covenant with other UUs to be in Right Relations, help one another and live/espouse liberal religious beliefs.
V	To be a person who prefers questions and the search for meaning more than an authority’s answers, and in particular, to be accepting of other people’s truths and journeys.
Y	Inclusion, diversity in all areas of life and thoughts. An intellectualized approach to visceral feelings and ideas.

Responses to Post-Project Questionnaire Question 1: “What does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist?”

Participant	Answer
A	To center love and build community.
B	It feels like home to me and I know I’ll find a community here - a community of diverse believers who share liberal values and support social justice.
E	The willingness to accept others’ point of view, the following of the seven principles, the idea that our faith grows and changes.
G	For me. Being a UU is an encouragement, a reminder to see value in all people, to care for each person and the environment, to work toward equity and justice in all things, and to step up when and how I can to further these beliefs.
L	My chosen faith guides me in my life through our principles - especially the first one - and by reading and talking and learning. I’m able to connect with a larger community. As a UU, I respect and see the inherent worth and dignity of every being and act with love.
M	There are diverse beliefs with shared values. The 7 principles immediately come to me. Now I add the 6 sources.
Q	It means being open to exploring new ideas, learning to live by certain values, and working towards a kinder world.
R	To be a part of a liberal and open religion.
T	To be accepting of others with perspectives and religious beliefs. It also means standing up for my beliefs and the social justice issues I believe in.
V	To care as deeply about others freedom of religious (or spiritual) growth as your own. To value love as the most powerful force in the universe of humans. To be curious about your own beliefs as well as others. To care deeply about the welfare of all.
Y	It means, for me, freedom to explore many faiths, as well as my own. It also means freedom to apply logic to those explorations. UUism also means a commitment to social justice and accountability for that commitment.

Responses to Pre-Project Questionnaire Question 2: “Do you feel comfortable telling others about Unitarian Universalism? If so, what do you say? If not, why not?”

Participant	Answer
A	Yes. My answer varies depending on the audience. Sometimes it’s a pithy “the hippy gay church.” Sometimes it’s a deeper exploration of the covenanted commitment to increase love in the world.
B	I feel very comfortable identifying as a UU in any setting and I usually talk about freedom of beliefs and a range of belief systems within it. That we welcome everyone.
E	Yes although I feel it takes a lot to explain.
G	I am comfortable speaking about UU and primarily I speak about the enthusiasm for the 7 principles. I do add a caveat that there is little to no talk about “GOD”.
L	Yes. A faith that allows each person to develop their own understanding and theology - not the creed - and work together to make the whole world better for all.
M	Yes, but I never/don’t know how to explain UU.
Q	I say, “it is a religion based on values rather than theology. It is an evolving religion that can change as we discover new things.”
R	I generally talk about community and the lack of dogma.
T	Yes. However, I am inclined to emphasize the universalists aspects as unitarian vs trinitarian concepts/arguments are not important to me from a theological perspective.
V	Nope. I feel like it’s too easy to talk about what it isn’t, opposed to what it is. Also I feel like I’m “passing” when I mention going to church. I don’t know why, but I know my church isn’t what people are assuming.
Y	I do. I tell them that Unitarians believed in one God, no trinity and Universalists believed that, if there is a heaven, everyone gets in. Both believed in God. In the 50s they combined to form UU. Now, we believe in everything and nothing and we’re ok with differences. I also explain that we have no concept of hell and no doctrine. We build our beliefs through reason and love.

Responses to Post-Project Questionnaire Question 2: “Do you feel comfortable telling others about Unitarian Universalism? If so, what do you say? If not, why not?”

Participant	Answer
A	Yes, we are a living tradition, we never stop seeking justice and love through being curious together.
B	I am comfortable and many times I talk about our support for social justice, and for religious tolerance in community.
E	Yes, I am a UU. We believe everyone follows their own spiritual path.
G	Depends on the audience. In casual conversation, my comfortable comment would be that UU is all about social justice and human dignity. In heartfelt conversation, I can/will get deeper in the weeds - the Seven Principles, community on the + side, theology ? on the side.
L	Yes, I’ve gotten better. “a pluralistic faith which allows me to develop my own beliefs re: God and spirituality and brings me into community with others who share common values and work to make this world better.
M	Not yet. I am still processing all the material and coming up with a concise wording.
Q	Yes, especially if they seem likely to join us. With those who want to convert me, I prefer to keep it short.
R	Yes I do. I believe that we have a lot to offer others.
T	I do. I’m proud of it’s activist history, especially as it relates to social justice, and am happy to discuss this with others. Because of my religious education when I was a Catholic, I am also comfortable discussing more theological issues, but this usually becomes combative because others feel the need to “save” me so I tend to avoid these conversations.
V	I’m better than I used to be, but not as eloquent as I want to be. I don’t think I’m completely over my defensiveness about being a “non-believer” in my church of origin (the United Methodists). I’m a work in progress.
Y	Yes. I start with very basic history and beliefs of Universalists and Unitarians pre-merger. Then I go on to a brief explanation of UUism since then. Then I tell them about the freedoms mentioned above.

Responses to Pre-Project Questionnaire Question 3: “What are your current beliefs as a Unitarian Universalist?”

Participant	Answer
A	That the world needs more love and connection. That there are many paths and spirituality is both individual and collective. Anything worth being done is better done together.
B	I am an amalgam of beliefs and my liberalism is made up of family upbringing, life experience in other religions, and can't be separated into blocks like UU.
E	The worth and dignity of every person.
G	100% agreement with the 7 principles AND I miss God.
L	Our principles and values are my guide. I can now say I do believe in “god” but I define god as the wonder and love and joy I feel when connecting with others – especially those different from me.
M	Accept others and their beliefs. Everyone is on their own journey and we can learn from each other.
Q	I believe that we must live in accordance with love and respect for others and being of service.
R	That I know less than I think I do.
T	Humanist inclinations align with my belief structure the most.
V	I embrace the principles. I believe in community as a lifeboat, and I believe that we have to love people who see things differently from me.
Y	I believe in inclusion, the power of art and liturgy to transform, open-ness to most ideas and a willingness to support justice informed by love.

Responses to Post-Project Questionnaire Question 3: “What are your current beliefs as a Unitarian Universalist?”

Participant	Answer
A	That love connects us all and liberation is essential for continuing to love each other.
B	As above - social justice, community. I feel that I need to do some homework about Section 2. I don't understand the vocabulary and UUA has a great deal of information on its website.
E	We are all connected with a force some people label as God.
G	See Seven Principles and lots of extracurricular reading about spirituality, under many umbrellas
L	That UU is well positioned to help resolve our cultural divides because we're naturally curious and open-minded (except when we're not!) - the world needs my voice as a UU to help others open their hearts to new truths.
M	I believe in the 7 principles
Q	I believe in living according to retain values and continuing to learn and explore. My religion is dynamic, not stagnant, and I love it.
R	Mostly non-religious. But I agree with their beliefs and goals for society.
T	I identify more with the Humanist elements and Universalist beliefs of UU-ism. I have become more accepting of “spiritualists” and those of a more religious background.
V	I don't want to be a helpful, caring human to impress a God that will grant me a reward. I want to live a life of service because working with others to “lift all boats” is the most fulfilling expression of love I have ever known.
Y	As a UU, I believe in the 7 principles and the unofficial 8th. I also believe in our commitments and covenants. As me, I believe in everything and nothing. I am an open-minded skeptic.

Responses to Pre-Project Questionnaire Question 4: “Do you feel your beliefs are welcome in Unitarian Universalism? If so, why? If not, why not?”

Participant	Answer
A	Sometimes. I talk with religious professionals the most and they welcome my ideal. Congregants, not always.
B	Yes, I've always felt at home in UU circles and wherever I've lived, I've checked out the UUs as a reference group. I'm a seeker as are many others here.
E	Yes, but sometimes I worry the church isn't evolving fast enough.
G	Not really. There doesn't seem to be any patience for God talk.
L	Yes - I've always (almost) felt heard and also aware that I need to speak and engage, too.
M	Yes. My beliefs are shared by others at UUUF.
Q	Yes! I like the emphasis on being honest and exploring new ideas.
R	Yes. Beliefs generally agree with others.
T	I do.
V	Yes - because my beliefs / values are similar to others in my congregation. Not 100% - but that's the beauty of U.U.
Y	Yes, because most beliefs are acceptable in UU-ism.

Responses to Post-Project Questionnaire Question 4: “Do you feel your beliefs are welcome in Unitarian Universalism? If so, why? If not, why not?”

Participant	Answer
A	Yes, but I'm too radical for many.
B	Yes, mostly - but I'm more Christian oriented than many many others and that's a disappointment that many are not tolerant.
E	Yes, because I have never found another faith that closely aligns with my beliefs.
G	I am of the opinion that - for the most part - UUUF members are disdainful of God talk. They are "too smart" to fall for that. And there doesn't seem to be understanding of spiritual comment/conversation. One longtime member commented on Facebook that she didn't see love as a spiritual practice.
L	Yes - I identify as a UU humanist so kind of mainstream. I do appreciate and have decided to use more religious language and filter it through my UU lenses. If I was a theist - I'd be worried.
M	Yes, because they are in agreement with the 7 principles.
Q	Yes! I feel welcome in this community.
R	Yes.
T	I do. As mentioned previously, my Humanism is well represented in our UU Principles.
V	I do feel my beliefs are welcome, but I have struggled and been disappointed at the number of hurt, wounded "expats" from Christian upbringings who belittle any exploration of God or the teachings of Jesus.
Y	Yes, I do. I am an old white lady. No one feels threatened by me and therefore they don't care what I believe.

Responses to Pre-Project Questionnaire Question 5: “What is your understanding of our history as a denomination?”

Participant	Answer
A	Complicated. Christian. Controversy. Conflict. Community. Covenant.
B	I usually reference Elliot Channing and Emerson and I've read a short book on Universalism. I'm not sure how we integrate both. We meaning UUs. How much as us is Universalist and how much is Unitarian.
E	They were two similar liberal faiths that merged: the Unitarians and the Universalists.
G	I have little knowledge of the history of UU.
L	Evolving. More questions than answers. Moving toward beloved community by staying in conversation. No more troubled than many others!
M	That Universalists and Unitarians were separate but joined in 1960s. The youth led the movement to merge.
Q	We started with people who didn't agree with the concept of the trinity. We evolved from a Christian religion into a Universal faith.
R	Groups (diverse) & beliefs accepting and merging.
T	UUism stood in contrast to other Christian churches that upheld the trinitarian doctrine, even though many early Church leaders question/rejected the idea of a Trinity.
V	I listen to history (including UU history) and I think it's amazing and fascinating, and then I promptly forget the details.
Y	Unitarians believed in one God, no trinity and Universalists believed that, if there is a heaven, everyone gets in. Both believed in God. In the 50s they combined to form UU. Now, we believe in everything and nothing and we're ok with differences. I also explain that we have no concept of hell and no doctrine. We build our beliefs through reason and love.

Responses to Post-Project Questionnaire Question 5: “What is your understanding of our history as a denomination?”

Participant	Answer
A	Complicated, messy, conflict avoidant fueled conflict.
B	There is so much to say about our history and I wish I could give more space here to the Universalists. But generally, we are birthed from the Puritan Reformation - their seriousness and passion and follow through Emerson who is a sort of role model to me in continuing to see his faith evolving and his discipline of journaling (I was reading about Emerson last night. He had hoped to reform the ministry but the reaction to his divinity school address made him a pariah).
E	There were the Unitarians and the Universalists. Both had rich traditions and they merged and evolved.
G	Two group, losing membership, joined together...never an auspicious beginning. Kind of like buying a stock as the price per share continues to fall. Seems to me that now could be a good time for UU membership to grow. Companies can be revitalized by a thoughtful shakeup, new leadership, great PR.
L	Fascinating. We come from a long line of thinkers who questioned the "regular order" of things. I really liked hearing the personal stories and journeys of our founders and all the others who have and are helping us shape our faith. We're messy and contentious like most religions yet we seem to discuss and reassess and adapt and hopefully keep the world moving forward in love.
M	It's complicated. Some believed all are saved while others believed in hell. Some were abolitionists others supported slaves. We were and still do have diverse opinions on many issues.
Q	We have evolved from a God-is-one Christian religion, through an anti-church intellectual club and then to a spiritual home.
R	One of working through problems to join together.
T	I am amazed that a group of acquaintances formed a community, some from a need to create a liberal religious community, others from a more social need, that is still going strong and making a difference in Central Florida.
V	It's complicated. But it's also a common story of people coming together, butting heads, wrestling with ideas and egos, and trudging onward.
Y	I think we've come a long way from our puritan oringins (in the US). I think we have a long way to go in living up to our principles, even farther with our covenants (first we have to acknowledge we have covenants).

APPENDIX B
JOURNAL RESPONSES

Participants' journals had questions for each session. However, not all questions were for data collection. All of the questions will be listed here, but only answers for data questions (bolded) will be recorded in the appendix.

Session 1: Universalist, Unitarian, and Unitarian Universalist History

1. What about our history surprised you?
2. What about our history intrigued you?
3. **What does our history tell you about Unitarian Universalism today?**
4. What would you like to learn more about?

Session 2: Theology: Deconstructing, Reconstructing, and Finding a Shared Container

1. Describe your childhood experience with religion, if any.
2. What things, if any, have you unpacked?
3. What things, if any, have you picked up and packed?
4. **How would you describe your personal theology?**
5. **How would you describe the shared theology of Unitarian Universalism?**

Session 3: Refilling Your Well: Spiritual Practices

1. What, if any, spiritual practices have you tried before?
2. What were the results of that time?
3. Are there any spiritual practices you might try this week for the first time?
4. If you tried something new, what was it, and how did it go?

Session 4: Cambridge Platform, Congregational Polity, and Covenant

1. **Describe your understanding of covenant.**
2. **What does it mean to be in relationship with other congregations?**
3. **How do we repair covenant?**
4. What happens when covenant can't be repaired?

Session 5: Unitarian Universalist Principles and Sources

1. **How do the current Seven Principles inform how we are to be in the world?**
2. **Why is it important to have multiple Sources?**
3. **How does our pluralism speak to our shared theology?**
4. **Are our Principles and Sources inclusive? If so, how? If not, why not?**

Session 6: Wrapping it Up: Program Assessment Questions

1. Overall, what was your experience with this program?
2. **What impact, if any, do you feel this program will have on your life going forward?**
3. What specifically did you find most helpful or useful about this program?
4. What specifically did you find most challenging or difficult about this program?

Responses to Session 1 Journal Question 3: “What does our history tell you about Unitarian Universalism today?”

Participant	Answer
A	Why don't we have more outright statements of what is inconsistent with our faith? How has congregational polity kept us from impacting society more?
B	That we rarely hear about what Universalists practice today. Do they have a special interest group at GA? What is their current service like? Sorry - it raises more questions than answers.
E	At critical times change was met with resistance even in progressive faith. It feels we may have reached a similar time and we see resistance.
G	It seems that UU today is unrecognizable as the Unitarianism and Universalism that founded today's church.
L	Good demonstration of how revelation is continuous. Unitarians have embraced new perspectives, ie, Transcendentalism, humanism, intellectual curiosity - head. Universalists - more inclusive love - “god”. Still struggling with paradox of heart and head today. I am proud to be UU - I can think for myself about God, spirituality, etc, and love all and work to change the world - and we can also make mistakes.
M	It's rich and complicated. The UUA is still dealing with the same issues.
Q	We share social justice concerns. We are sensitive to the concerns of marginalized groups who have not always felt included. GA must be like a political convention!
R	That UUs seem to typically be people that didn't fit in other places. That can mean that we don't fit in perfectly here either. Or there is some personal reason we don't “fit in.”
T	Change is a constant! It can be messy at times, but it can also result in great achievements. I believe it is important to be honest with ourselves - both our failures and successes. Maintaining our democratic processes are essential to staying a vibrant faith.
V	It's complicated! We are a faith that developed from many different groups that held Unitarian and/or Universalist beliefs. But that seems like such an apt description of our individual congregations today. Perhaps our history is still reflected in the creation of our faith communities now.
Y	That the more things change, the more they stay the same. We still struggle with issues of race and religion, Humanists still have a way of making the rest feel like they're seen as fools. That we love our meetings and bureaucracy.

Responses to Session 2 Journal Question 4: “How would you define your personal theology?”

Participant	Answer
A	Love is my spirit. Service is my prayer.
B	I believe all religions share some spark of the ineffable. I don't have an issue with reframing Christian beliefs because the myth of a god returning from death is an ancient one, predating Christianity. All the holy books have something to offer us.
E	I believe in the interconnectedness of humans and that energy of love is God energy. I don't care what happens after for it may not be real. The here and now is more real.
G	My view of Theology. It seems that there must be some kind of creative force. I have described myself as an optimistic agnostic. Truthfully, I am a theist with a boatload of questions. I am a very literal person; mystic interpretation are beyond me. I can't come up with them, but I 'get' them when shared with me. If all of life is the physical and mental, it doesn't seem worth it. A spiritual part is necessary for me.
L	Loving, inclusive, and curious. Everyone has value. “God” for me is for all I don't know, the mystery, for the goosebumps I get when I see beauty, the awe; the love I feel when with others, the connections. All means all; there is enough for all; our job is to learn how to share.
M	I believe God is energy. I really don't like the term “God.” I prefer universe - it's more encompassing and has less of a negative connotation. While I believe in the teachings of Jesus, I don't believe anyone needs a savior. I believe in an afterlife that looks like heaven. I have a hard time believing that something would create us just to send us to hell (see book).
Q	I believe in the mystery of life and love. I believe in an Inner Light, like a conscience, that helps me to determine right from wrong. I believe I have a responsibility to be a good citizen of the Earth and the Universe.
R	Don't worry too much about those bigger questions. Try to do what is good and right.
T	I classify myself as an Existentialist and Humanist. Existentialism describes what I'm against, while Humanism describes what I'm for. While I am capable of and seek deep relationships with people and I don't consider myself spiritual. While I have been anti-spiritual in the past, I do realize the desire to connect with other humans on a very deep level or with God/life force is hardwired in humans. Ultimately, I tend to reject superstitions.
V	It matters what I do with my life. Living for just your own pleasure and happiness is not true contentment; not fulfilling. I believe there is something - a spirit, a force that is out of any complete view and understanding. It's exciting to think about receiving glimpses of this life force throughout the rest of my days, and that after I die, some part of me will return to the collective, Holy “Whole.”
Y	Neo-Pagan, Judeo-Christian, Buddhist, Episcotarian (sic), UU, agnostic. I believe in everything and nothing, often simultaneously.

Responses to Session 2 Journal Question 5: "How would you describe the shared theology of Unitarian Universalism?"

Participant	Answer
A	Community love.
B	I think, from prior reading, that the root of Unitarianism is religious tolerance. We have a religious foundation - the king of Transylvania decreed his kingdom as tolerant in religion. That's the trunk of the tree. The original Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Pilgrims, and Puritans were here to practice their religion. Yes - they were not tolerant, you had to go to Rhode Island for tolerance - but after the first generation of Puritans died, the next generation began modifying the religion and due to King Charles II, toleration was the law. Massachusetts was a hotbed of religious discussion.
E	The inherent worth and dignity of every human, the responsible seeking of truth, most UUs have more liberal values.
G	The idea of a shared theology is great. However, in my opinion, UUUF comes up short on theology in general.
L	Theology is/can be a loaded word! Reason and science and love and conscience and action --> beloved community. We, as UUs, are so equipped to help change the world. Hopefully we can lead by example with love and encourage others to join us - one hart at a time. (And, we sometimes continue to be our own worst enemies).
M	I try to tell them the 7 principles but I only sort of remember 3 of them. Everyone has worth and dignity, we are all having individual experiences which shape our beliefs and values, and we are interconnected to each other and to everything else under the sun.
Q	It seems to me that UUs share a desire to be good, kind people who want a peaceful, loving world. We do not believe in a powerful god who punishes sinners, and most UUs think that Jesus was a wise teacher and activist, but not a super-divine being.
R	Don't worry too much about those bigger questions. Try to do what is good and right.
T	The theology of Unitarianism vs trinitarianism as it relates to Christianity doesn't speak to me. It's a theology, Universalism also don't speak to me because of the "saved" part. As a Humanist, however, UU principles do speak to me. I appreciate being in a covenantal relationship with like-minded individuals who are also striving to be and do good.
V	Everyone's spiritual or not so spiritual journey is worthy of supportive community. We are better seekers of our truths together. Love is the spirit of this church. The seven principles show us how to make that love a verb.
Y	Ideally, UU-ism is broad and tall, deep and wide. There is room for everyone who wants to make room for everyone. We believe in love, justice, and finding common ground, acknowledging our own imperfections and our lack of absolute knowledge of anything spiritual. We know we do not know. I hope. Our roots are Judeo-Christian. Our present road is much wider.

Responses to Session 4 Journal Question 1: "Describe your understanding of covenant."

Participant	Answer
A	Created community boundaries.
B	For the Cambridge Platform (which I looked up later) I took away a covenant among congregants to worship together as a church, to call a minister, if they wished. Leadership is not by bishop or elder but of the group itself.
E	The agreement between congregations and a central location. Also, the agreement between people in a congregation.
G	Mutual support and respect within the membership...ideally.
L	Covenant - a mutual set of promises and agreement on how to be together in relationship. Primarily behavior-oriented.
M	That is an oath or a promise that individual maintains regardless of the actions of others.
Q	A voluntary agreement between people.
R	An agreement among ourselves, generally containing statements about expectations about how we will behave among each other.
T	Literally, covenant is an agreement between two or more people that governs how they will interact. It's a promise. Promising you will be there for others and they for you, forms a powerful bond.
V	It describes the highest values of a congregation, the promises members and congregations make to each other and how to strive to treat each other.
Y	It's biblical in origin and there are outward signs associated with covenant. Rings for marriage; rainbow for God and Noah; tithe to my congregation; my congregation's dues to the UUA.

Responses to Session 4 Journal Question 2: “What does it mean to be in relationship with other congregations?”

Participant	Answer
A	To celebrate joys and sorrows together, to work together in the community to bring radical love to everyone. To be held accountable to our shared values.
B	Historically, it's vague since congregations were isolated by distance except in places like Boston. Currently, I'm not sure. At one time I remember going on a regional retreat but I haven't seen one offered for years. I'd love it if we swapped ministers. The First Church of Orlando has been working on the 8th principle for months, but for some reason, we weren't included.
E	Getting resources and support between each other.
G	No answer
L	I miss our district meetings where we'd connect with other congregations with intent. Being in relation: sharing events, work on projects together, help when needed, don't poach staff, address problems or concerns directly (if any), share information important to congregational life.
M	That congregations help and support each other.
Q	We agree on certain shared principles and ways of communicating with each other.
R	To share a resource such as knowledge.
T	"Relation" connotes a connectedness, a deeper way of being together. It's not superficial. Sadly, in my experience, either when I was a practicing Catholic or now as a UU, there was never a close relationship between churches. Going back to my childhood, I knew that someone who went to Sacred Heart practiced Catholicism the same way I did, but I was a "Falcon," not a Sacred Heart "Jaguar." GA and SUUSI, to name two UU events, do offer ways for different congregations to interact but on a daily basis, my experience has been that UU churches don't look for ways to connect like they should.
V	Caring about the health of fellow UU congregations. Putting that love and care into action by being a witness and deeply invested partner in supporting another UU congregation's spiritual growth and good relationships within its walls and in the wider community.
Y	It means we owe them our time, attention, and talent. It also means we can call on them when we are in need.

Responses to Session 4 Journal Question 3: “How do we repair covenant?”

Participant	Answer
A	listening, conversations
B	Good question. We've been fortunate to be able to get along without any major schisms...with give and take.
E	Find a place of trust to build and build from there. Admit when there are problems and change when necessary.
G	Conversation; understanding; listening; acceptance; apology extended/received.
L	Acknowledge it's broken - with self and with other party. Talk about it with each other; share stories; ask questions; hope to come to shared understanding and begin anew. If need help: COSM (if have one); board; minister; mediation to listen and help resolve.
M	First, all parties have to admit that a covenant has been broken. All parties have to be willing to fix it. Then lots of open and honest dialogue must take place. Apologies probably need to be made. Hopefully there is compassion and understanding.
Q	We review, discuss and find common purpose with love and respect for each other.
R	Reassess the covenant. Find out why it needs to be repaired.
T	Just as UU churches can turn to sister congregations or the UUA, individual congregants can seek mediation with their minister or others in the church community if they can't resolve their differences by themselves.
V	Probably by seeking to listen and understand the other. Reflection and a willingness to keep going - in love - and without an agenda based on personal preference and comfort alone. A dedication to the collective good, rather than personal complete satisfaction of an ideal.
Y	1. Acknowledgement that covenants broke, 2. Agreement the covenant's worth repairing; 3. Possible apologies (public or private), 4. Active listening to those we have wronged. 5. Where possible, restitutions should be made. 6. Reformation of covenant.

Responses to Session 5 Journal Question 1: “How do the current Seven Principles inform how we are to be in the world?”

Participant	Answer
A	Not assholes.
B	This is the lecture that I was late to. But they have always seemed like uncomplicated statements that are easy to read and are descriptive.
E	It explains who we are and why we've formed this congregation. What brings us together and separates us from other churches.
G	I think the 7 principles are well stated, inclusive, inspiring. They "should" be the basis of all spiritual practices.
L	For me, the Principles are an easy way to start conversation about UU. I used to try and recite them and always forgot one or two. Now, I'm more likely to say we're a pluralistic faith with individual spiritual paths and shared values. And then mention the 7 principles, 6 sources, and perhaps my definition of God.
M	We are to be loving, compassionate, curious, and peaceful in our daily lives. They let others know our values.
Q	They encourage us to treat all people with kindness and respect, and that everyone is sacred and deserving. They encourage a free and responsible search for truth, using many sources. They encourage us to work together for a peaceful, fair and free world.
R	(did not attend this class)
T	Our UU Principles are a declaration to all about what we stand for. They are a short, concise way of reminding us who we are and strive to be. They call us to remember what is at our core.
V	They are a moral compass and guide that we promote as shared values of our faith. The principles state what we strive for and aspire to be in our daily lives. (Please note - I had to squelch the words "what we believe" 3x writing these two sentences above.)
Y	Our current principles make it clear that we are to work toward a just and more perfect world, showing acceptance and respect to all people and things, in the process.

Responses to Session 5 Journal Question 2: “Why is it important to have multiple sources?”

Participant	Answer
A	multiple ways of knowing in the world
B	I think they are the bedrock of this faith - the many teachings and wisdom from many traditions, renewal and counsel.
E	I think there's wisdom in many different places, and deciding to just rely on one doesn't go with UU beliefs and philosophy.
G	People of faith (not just church attendance) are at a place of belief/acceptance of their particular theology. It isn't a question of right or wrong. Open eyes make for an open heart. I think of the diversity in nature. One flower is not better than another. They are suited to their environment. Not sure if I answered your question...Inspiration, understanding, new insights, openness are all pathways for our ongoing evolution.
L	So we hear more than one story - perspective - voice. Every religion and non-religion has a piece of the truth. If we don't look outside our own knowledge and interpretation, we can't grow and we miss so much.
M	The more sources we use, the more information or perspectives we have we gain a better understanding.
Q	People all over the world search for truth and meaning in life. We benefit from being exposed to discoveries and ideals from everyone, including people whose life experiences differ greatly from ours. We need an evolving religion that adapts to new discoveries and ideas.
R	(Did not attend this class)
T	While some of our religious sources proclaim to know the absolute truth - and condemn those that don't believe their truth, to hell - it is unlikely, and some would argue, a falacy to believe this. That's not to say some or many of their teachings are valuable. Likewise, other "sources" have much they can teach us.
V	Most UUs reject the idea of one "true" source of all spiritual / religious wisdom. We feel like we would be missing out! We also value peoples direct experience of the sacred as well as reason, science and earth-centered practices that honor the sacred and diving we experience in nature.
Y	So that more voices are represented and so that the same expectations are stated in many different ways for many different ears.

Responses to Session 5 Journal Question 3: "How does our pluralism speak to our shared theology?"

Participant	Answer
A	Pluralism is our shared theologies
B	I'm not sure I understand this one. Looking up "pluralism" on the UUA website - it is described as "a sociological, not theological" idea. Also, of relationships with others and actions for the good of all. The word is "packed."
E	Drawing on multiple sources and not holding one source over another. It also allows for diversity within the faith.
G	Not sure of what this question is asking. Think its that THEOLOGY word again.
L	Ideally, every congregation would reflect the community in which it exists and we would have a vast array of religious and ethnicities represented with "Beloved Community" as our shared worldview. And, in reality, it's way harder than it looks to overcome our individual biases so that anyone walking through our doors feel welcome (psychopaths and extremists excepted).
M	Pluralism is part of our sources. Our shared theology comes from our experiences, individual and shared, and from our own religions (ones we were raised in or exposed to).
Q	By accepting that there are many different paths in religious life, we are encouraged to explore with others. We learn to co-exist in a spirit of mutual respect.
R	(did not attend this class)
T	Something that has always resonated with me regarding UU is how people from many different faiths find a home here. At our best, we are welcoming and inquisitive.
V	By being curious and open to diverse faith traditions we honor the varied backgrounds and beliefs of our members, while creating a "richer, tastier banquet" that feeds more souls. (at its best). I find personally that pluralism shows me an important common thread that could/should bond all of humanity in love!
Y	We believe we are an "us." That is a double-edged sword. We accept those who want to be part of our "us," so long as they want to be the same "us" we believe we are. For someone who is a different sort, our "us" is pretty closed off. It's easier to be in the club if you're catholic.

Responses to Session 5 Journal Question 4: “Are our Principles and Sources inclusive? If so, how? If not, why not?”

Participant	Answer
A	No, because people feel excluded. We have to believe them. Bending the arc towards justice will always uncover more injustice. That’s its design, its purpose.
B	I think they are, but speaking as someone living predominantly in a white area, I think an 8th principle is warranted. We don’t see the issues at play in Washington DC, Atlanta, or Philly.
E	No, I think it’s been shown that certain people still feel excluded and not welcomed. If POCs still feel there are issues, we should honor that.
G	The Principles are inclusive only as far as the individual is inclusive. Words don’t make a person inclusive. Words can be thought-provoking, inspiring AND they can also be used in any number of negative ways or simple misinterpreted. All the word-smithing that goes on at UU is interesting. No matter how hard we work to make the words right - each individual will interpret the word through many filters: experience, education, an open heart or a closed heart...
L	I just re-read the Principles and Sources and my initial thought is: yes, they’re inclusive. However, I’m not missing! Who is? What is? Men and women changed to people - good! Should “Every person” change to all beings? Everything? Should we add Islam? Abrahamic faiths? Where is atheism? Open to conversation!
M	In theory, yes, they are inclusive. In practice, not so much because we are humans with prejudices and biases. We have a long way to go to be completely inclusive with our actions.
Q	I think they are inclusive now. However, I understand that we have not always been successful in being truly inclusive, are that concerns over racism have caused people to feel unwelcome.
T	I believe they are or they strive to be so. Words are important. If we had harmful language in any of our principles that sought to disparage anyone for their race, faith, sexual orientation, etc, we should change them. I don’t believe our principles are exclusive or hurtful. Additionally, we are call to, and have the tools, to change/modify them.
V	This question makes me think I am missing something, because I would say “yes” rather quickly to this question. I think the 8th principle is crucial, however. I am glad to know it was written by black UUs who obviously deeply care that our faith puts its intentions into action.
Y	Honestly, our principles are easier said than done. They are much easier for those who live with privilege. It is hard to be bothered with principle of any kind if you’re about to be evicted and can’t afford groceries.

Responses to Session 6 Journal Question 2: "What impact, if any, do you feel this program will have in your life going forward?"

Participant	Answer
A	Closer connections with congregants
B	I have a strong sense of what being a congregation means historically. It doesn't have to do with ministers or organizations like UUA (although I'd like to go to GA just as an onlooker). Every year we have sent 2 delegates and I can not remember a thing they said about it. I've been coming to UUUF since the year 2000. Well, it made me think harder and read more about who we are.
E	The historical stuff was fascinating. There was a lot I did not know. Being able to discuss my beliefs and their roots was not something I'd done recently. It's always a helpful exercise.
G	Well, I'll more than likely read some of the many recommended books. I like the idea that this "doctoral project" will not only move you along your path but it has the potential to encourage us (the attendees) to move more intentionally along our individual paths.
L	Continue to raise my awareness of how little we really "know" and continue my reflection time to build confidence and conviction. I know deep in my heart what I believe and I want to improve my spoken word and ability to encourage others to open their hearts. This program will become part of my repository of questions and answers and resources.
M	I have a better understanding of UU and the UUA. This will impact how I serve on the board and think about issues within the UU and UUA.
Q	I need to take the time to learn and understand proposed changes and why they are uncomfortable for some. I need to support programs that will make more people of different backgrounds feel welcome and included here at UUUF. Because I grew up as a Unitarian and then a UU, perhaps I take this wonderful faith for granted. I need to remind myself to live my faith every day and honor its values.
R	I have realized more strongly that I come to UU churches for community. It is a quick and easy way to meet a mostly like-minded group of people when traveling in the US.
T	There were certainly aspects of the class that were enlightening and will help me moving forward, especially when it comes to discussing Uuism. I look forward to receiving the reading list that will be provided at the end of class as these will help further my development.
V	I think my commitment to Unitarian Universalism feels stronger. I know a few people shared that they felt "saddened" or a "bit depressed" to learn some of the history of UUs. I don't share that sentiment. I actually feel the opposite. I feel like I love humanity more when I see the failures and the efforts to rectify them. I experience connection with others when we all acknowledge short comings in ourselves and our faith community. This program gave me a perspective that made me feel hopeful.
Y	I plan to become more active in UUUF and UUA programs and events. I want to be in deeper.

APPENDIX C
INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

United Theological Seminary
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Investigator Name: Tracie Barrett

Contact Information: XXX-XXX-XXXX, tbarrett1@united.edu

Introduction: I am a doctoral student at United Theological Seminary.

Purpose: I am conducting a study on an in-depth understanding of Unitarian Universalism and how that affects participants in their faith and ability to express what Unitarian Universalism is for others.

Requirements for Participation: You are invited because you are a friend or member of University Unitarian Universalist Fellowship and are interested in learning more about Unitarian Universalism.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to: Participate in six (6) class sessions beginning Sunday, February 5, 2023, and ending on March 12, 2023. Class times are 1:30pm to 3:30pm. Participants will be asked to answer pre- and post-questionnaires as well as participate in group discussions and write in a journal to be turned in. The class will be video recorded for my notes only. Near the end of the course, you may be invited to participate in a one-on-one recorded interview. No names will be used in the final report of the study.

Human Subject participation:

All the participants must have consented to be in the study, and participants must be protected and treated fairly throughout the study. And for women who are pregnant or may become pregnant during the study, they must provide a doctor's note for their safety, since they are considered a protected class (i.e., vulnerable population) by the Federal Law. All participants will be 18 years or older.

Risks:

Risks of this project include the potential for a shakeup in the participant's faith and/or connection to Unitarian Universalism.

Benefits:

The benefit of participation in this project is the opportunity for the participant to grow deeper in Unitarian Universalism.

Voluntariness:

Participation is voluntary and you may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. You can also stop participating at any time. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your membership in the congregation. If something makes you feel uncomfortable in any way while you are in the study, please contact me directly in

person, on the phone, or electronic communication. My contact information is at the top of this consent form. You can refuse to respond to any or all of the questions, and you will be able to withdraw from the process at any time.

Confidentiality:

We will be careful to keep your information confidential, and we will ask you and all the focus group members to keep the discussion confidential as well. There is always a small risk of unwanted or accidental disclosure. The conversations and the focus groups will be recorded and transcribed only with your permission. Any notes, recordings, or transcriptions will be kept private. I will be the only one with access to your information. The files will be encrypted, and password protected. Names will not be used throughout data collection or reporting. Data will be protected in a locked file cabinet and shredded/destroyed after five (5) years.

Summary:

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact me.

Signature:

Signing this paper means that you have read this, or had it read to you, and that you want to be in the study. If you do not want to be in the study, do not sign the paper. Being in the study is up to you, and no one will be mad if you do not sign this paper or even if you change your mind later. You agree that you have been told about this study and why it is being done and what to do.

Signature of Person Agreeing to
Signed
Participate in the Project/Study

Date

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